

Vernacular Theology, Home Birth and the Mormon Tradition

by

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the personal experience narratives of Mormon birth workers and mothers who home birth. I argue that embedded in their stories are vernacular beliefs that inform their interpretations of womanhood and broaden their conceptions of Mormon theology. Here I trace the tradition of Mormon midwifery from nineteenth century Mormonism into the present day and explore how some Mormon birth workers' interpretation of the Mormon past became a means of identity formation and empowerment. I also examine how several recurring motifs reveal how the pain of natural childbirth—either in submission to or in the surmounting of—became a conduit of theological innovations for the women participating in this research. Their stories shed light on and respond to institutional positions on the family and theological ambiguities about woman's role in the afterlife. Drawing on the language of my contributors, I argue that in birth women are sacralized, opening the door to an expanding (and empowering) image of Mormon womanhood.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This thesis examines the personal experience narratives of Mormon midwives, doulas and women who home birth. I argue that embedded in their stories are vernacular theologies that provide an expansive vision of women's membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). My contributors' beliefs coalesce around the experience of natural childbirth. In the anguish of labor and the empowerment of its fruition, Mormon women have developed meaningful discourses about the sacred ritual of birth. For some LDS birth workers, this has occurred through establishing a relationship to the Mormon past and more specifically, to Mormon foremothers who were once called and set apart by prophets and apostles of God. For others, including the women who labor, birth becomes a space in which women are made holy and their power is manifest. The central research question that I attempt to answer in this study is how women's vernacular theologies, which relate to home birth, inform Latter-day Saint identity. I also examine how my contributors' narratives broaden the official discourse on Mormon women's roles, address institutional lacunas, and respond to patriarchy.

To situate myself within this research, I am a Mormon woman and a mother of three boys—two of which were born over the course of this research. My last was delivered with a midwife in a hospital, but my first two were delivered in my home. Undoubtedly, this research stems from an interest that I developed in the years preceding graduate school when I realized I was pregnant with my first child. I still have the indicator that confirmed the presence of hCG levels in my body, revealing that a fertile egg had attached itself to my uterine wall. I was elated. I began my physical initiation into motherhood with morning sickness, leg cramps, debilitating

headaches and an expanding abdomen. To say I had any real foresight as to how my life would change would be a lie. But with each month I was transformed, physically, and also psychologically. These sensations, although extremely personal and largely solitary, connected me to other women—and the concept of womanhood more generally—in novel ways.

For instance, not until I approached motherhood did I take an interest in my mother's story of her experiences with birth. My mother who fought, forgoing the ease of pain medication, through countless hours of Pitocin-induced contractions to carry my infant body through the birth canal and eventually into her arms, suddenly appeared wiser. I felt that she and other past initiates were privy to a facet of women's identity that I was not. They shared a social identity tied to a host of paradoxical experiences that, like birth, were accompanied by immense pain and joy. As my pregnancy progressed and my hips widened, women began to share their birth stories. Some were encouraging, others terrifying, but all broadened my view of the vast sisterhood that united so many women, past and present.

While my story is not the focus here, this thesis is indisputably intertwined in the story of my son's birth, an exhausting but transformative labor that came to fruition on the living-room floor of my two-bedroom apartment. It is also intricately linked to the births of my two other sons that followed. Those experiences nurtured my interest and opened the door to a network of Mormon women whose countless stories both informally and formally directed my future research and writing.

Birth is a transformative experience in the lives of all women, but I have chosen to narrow my gaze to Mormon women. While I focus on only one segment of modern women, I believe this case study yields valuable insights into the ways that women assert their agency in patriarchal and religiously conservative communities more generally. As Reid J. Leamaster and



Rachel L. Einwohner argue in their article on Mormon women's gendered resistance, "religiously conservative women are active agents within the gendered structure of their religious organizations and their families—even though from the view of outsiders it may appear they are mostly submitting to gender-traditional ideologies" (2017, 1). Likewise, the stories shared by my contributors highlight women working within the Mormon gender paradigm to access agency.

This thesis draws on my knowledge as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and a home-birther. Over the course of my membership—I am a convert of nearly a decade and a half—I have had the privilege of interacting with Latter-day Saints of all demographics from the United States to Japan and Eastern Canada. It is my hope that my insider perspective adds depth to this research. As Diane Goldstein has argued, folklorists must learn the language of their participants, the "conceptual categories" of a community, so as not to distort their words (1983, 106). Some of the success in my approach then can be credited to the twelve years I have spent in the pews and the two children I gave birth to at home. I recognize, however, that the experiences and vernacular beliefs that shape *my* Mormon identity are not the experiences or vernacular beliefs that shape the Mormon identity of all other women. As a result, throughout this research, I have strived to remove my voice (as a participant) and to allow the voices of my contributors to speak for themselves.

## Literature Review

This research converges at three points of interest: vernacular religion, Mormon folklore, and birth. The following literature review explores several publications that I deem to be not only significant to the development of this research, but seminal works in their respective fields.

It traces major developments in folklore studies, neglected areas of inquiry and, in conclusion, positions my research in reference to this broader scholarship.

## 1. Vernacular Religion

Don Yoder was one of the first to offer a succinct definition of folk religion, which he described as “the totality of all those views and practices of religion that exist among the people apart from and alongside with strictly theological and liturgical form of the official religion” (1974, 14). Leonard Primiano later advocated for a semantic and ideological shift, coining the term “vernacular religion” as a means of centering, rather than marginalizing, non-institutional beliefs and practices. He argued that the two-tiered model of official and folk religion privileged religious institutions and juxtaposed them as a pure religious normative against an impure (folk) religious other. Primiano’s notion of vernacular religion, that he defined as “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (1995, 44), comprised the institutionalized and informal religious expressions of both clergy and parishioner. This shift broadened the horizon of folkloristic interest in religious belief.

Primiano’s concept is similar to “lived religion,” an idea that garnered popularity in the fields of religious studies and sociology through the work of Robert Orsi (2002), David Hall (1997) and Meredith McGuire (2008). As pioneers in their respective disciplines, these scholars also recognized the expansive historical and cultural implications of a grounded, ethnographic approach. Orsi argued that “lived religion” offered a more holistic approach to religious studies, explaining that “religious practices and understandings only have meaning in relation to other cultural forms and in relationship to the life experiences and actual circumstances of the people using them” (2002, xxxviii). Both Primiano and Marion Bowman, another leading folklorist in the field, are professionally trained in the field of religious studies and have attempted to blend

vernacular religion with its conceptual cousin, lived religion. For example, Bowman's *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief* bridges the gap between folklore and religious studies with an interdisciplinary approach.

There is a growing literature in folklore on vernacular religion as expressed through diverse subjects and contexts including internet religion (Howard 2011), Ukrainian national identity and Paganism (Lesiv 2013), the "Bible of the Folk" in Newfoundland, Canada (Bowman 2014), and Catholic Ex-votos paintings (Sciorra 2015). Women have also been the focus of several major studies (Bradey 2001; Lawless 2005; Shapiro Davie 1995; Bell 2013). Elaine Lawless has been one of the most prolific contributors to this body of female-centered works. Her study of Pentecostal women pastors, for example, reveals how some women work within the framework of patriarchal religion to legitimate their position of authority (2010). While this has been a major theme of religious studies texts such as Oris's *Thank you, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (1998) and Mary McCartin Wearn's *Nineteenth-Century American Women Write Religion: Lived Theologies and Literature* (2014), it has been less investigated by folklorists. In addition to Lawless, another important writer is Jody Shapiro Davie. Her *Women in the Presence: Constructing Community and Seeking Spirituality in Mainline Protestantism* is a study of the Bridgeton Presbyterian Church's women Bible study group. Davie's book not only details a "contemporary, mainstream, middle-class religious" women's community (1995, 7), subject positions which folklorists have traditionally neglected, but explores the silence that members invoke to protect their most intimate beliefs and therefore, most personal identities.

One of the most relevant studies for this present thesis is folklorist Margaret K. Brady's examination of the "pre-birth experiences" (PBEs) of Mormon women. Brady argues that PBEs,

which are effectively spirit apparitions of unborn progeny that announce their desire to be embodied through pregnancy and birth, extend women a type of “personal and social power derived from bringing one’s own value choices in alignment with the spiritual values of the community” (2013, 223). These memorates grant women control over reproduction, which is significant in Mormon homes where men “preside.” Folklorist and Mormon Eric A. Eliason, who responded to Brady’s claim, asserted that Mormon families operate within a more “egalitarian, even matriarchal” fashion and that PBEs “tend to bring unity” (2014, 26). While both scholars may find evidence to substantiate their arguments among LDS families, Brady’s assertion about how PBEs function in the lives of some Mormon women is significant. Inquiries regarding where Mormon women’s power lies and how power is incurred within patriarchal religions are fundamentally important and yet are often sorely neglected.

## 2. Mormon Folklore

The second body of literature that this thesis draws on explores Mormon folklore. Over the past three years, as I have discussed my research with other Latter-day Saints, I often have been met with blank stares. Many Mormons cannot fathom how folklore correlates to religious experience. In a popular sense, folklore usually refers to fairytales and legends, narratives most perceive as specious, if not deliberately fictional. In fact, I would surmise that despite my best efforts to explain the subject of my interest, the word “folklore” has cost me at least a few potential participants. Among Mormons, folklore has been associated with popular legends such as accounts of the Three Nephites (see: Wilson 2009; Lee 1949; Fife 1940), immortal Saint figures, or J. Golden Kimball, a colorful and unpredictable early twentieth-century leader of the Church (see: Cheney 1974; Eliason 2007). While believers accept that these

miraculous stories could be true, many contemporary Latter-day Saints believe that only the naive would accept them without verification. These legends are occasionally told from the pulpit to uplift, but they are more commonly shared in intimate circles to entertain.

According to William A. “Bert” Wilson, folklorists have added to the confusion by too often emphasizing the most extraordinary forms of folklore. Wilson, a prolific scholar of Mormon folklore, recognized the disparity between Mormon vernacular religion and the more fantastical lore that existed not only in the broader field but also in his own research. He noted with regret, “I let myself be too easily influenced by what folklorists generally have considered to be memorable in religious folklore—that is, with dramatic tales of the supernatural rather than with the quiet lives of committed services that I knew really lay at the heart of Mormon experience.” He recognized that while a rich tradition of the supernatural lore existed in Mormonism, that it was “only part of a larger, more important, whole” (2006, 199).

Some of the folklorists who have focused on more mundane aspects of Mormons’ everyday devotions are included in Eliason and Tom Mould’s *Latter-day Lore: Mormon Folklore Studies*, a massive 591-page collection that brings together the full range of Mormon folklore. As well, Mould’s *Still, the Small Voice: Narrative, Personal Revelation and the Mormon Folk Tradition* skillfully probes the nuances of LDS culture from the rhetoric of personal revelation to its varied functionality.

Within folklore, the lives of Mormon women and the ordinary experiences from which they create meaning and construct identity in relationship to their faith has not yet been fully explored. As Eliason and Mould argue, “Continued ethnographic study of traditions performed within the explicitly gendered spaces of Relief Society and the implicitly gendered spaces of church and home more generally deserves greater attention, particularly in term of how Mormon

women use these traditions to respond to the patriarchy” (2014, 46). This is not to say there are no significant studies—for example, the work of Brady and Kristi Bell Young represent important contributions--but Mormon women’s folklore remains vastly understudied.

### 3. Childbirth

In addition to scholarship on vernacular religion and Mormon folklore, this thesis also draws on a growing literature on the ethnography of childbirth. To survey the entire field of childbirth studies would be a massive undertaking that falls beyond the scope of this research. However, a few seminal works deserve mention here. For instance, in 1977, Richard W. Wertz and Dorthy C. Wertz published *Lying-In: A History of Childbirth in America* that sketches childbirth from colonial America to the home birth movement of the 1980s (see 1989 expanded edition). This crucial study sparked contemporary interest in childbirth during an era when women’s bodies were a subject of political contestation and feminism was drastically changing the landscape for America women.

Laurel Ulrich's Pulitzer prize-winning *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1755-1812* (1990) is also a formidable text among the histories of American childbirth. The significance of the book is vested in Ulrich’s efforts to bring out the actual accounts of Martha Ballard and her career as a midwife in New England. Ulrich interpreted what many historians at the time considered to be too mundane a memoir for the subject of an in-depth inquiry. She brought to light the conditions of 18<sup>th</sup> century American women and childbirth and highlighted the importance of women’s history.

The greater part of this present study, however, is in conversation with those works that explore the birth narratives of contemporary women. Not surprisingly, many of the initial efforts

were made by women and for the more part, non-academics. For example, Ina May Gaskin, a seasoned midwife, recorded the experiences of laboring women in her book *Spiritual Midwifery* (1975). The book presented childbirth from a more holistic vantage point, highlighting the spiritual in women's personal experiences. American feminist artist Judy Chicago also played a major role in bringing to light the experience of childbirth through her collaboration with over one hundred needleworkers to create a colossal exhibit celebrating the various aspects of birth. Chicago named it *The Birth Project*. The exhibit presented dozens of images depicting woman's creative prowess in everything from the literal acts of pregnancy and labor to the mythological re-imagination of the Genesis narrative. In 1985, Chicago explained the significance of the project:

It has been my privilege and my burden to open the door on a secret reality, one that even most women would like to deny. I have tried to express what I've seen—the glory and horror of the birth experience itself, the joy and pain of pregnancy, the sense of entrapment that goes along with the satisfaction of giving life. I certainly do not feel that I have even begun to convey all that the birth experience (or, more importantly, the deep gratification many women say comes with raising a child) is like. I have only tried to suggest, through my art, that this is a subject worth confronting, a subject rich in meaning and in significance for women's lives, and—because women are over half the population, because everyone is born, and because children have to be raised—a subject worthy of attention of the entire human race. (1985, 224)

Chicago's work drew from nearly two decades of childbirth activism among women. Her art provided the world with the opportunity to see birth both abstractly and personally—in terms of women's experiences and beliefs.

Major academic explorations followed. One of the earliest ethnographic explorations of childbirth is Judith Walzer Leavitt's *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750-1950* (1988) in which Leavitt's interviews with women and their birth care professionals are included. Her book offers a well-balanced exploration of midwifery's role in empowering women, obstetrics' rise in the twentieth century, women's loss of power and the increased mortality rate among mothers and children. In 1992, medical anthropologist Robbie-Davie Floyd published *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* examining, from an anthropological perspective, the technocratic ritual of birth and the symbolism embedded in obstetrical protocol. She argued that women undergo three stages from pregnancy to birth (separation, pregnancy and integration) that lead American women to accept their new social identities as mothers. Davies-Floyd's book has been hailed as a foundational publication in the study of birth for its theoretical approach, but there is also merit in her inclusion of personal narratives that humanize her study and her subjects. Della Pollock, a scholar of communication studies, also brings a unique lens to childbirth in her book, *Telling Bodies Performing Birth: Everyday Narratives of Childbirth* (1999), which takes a performative studies and narrative theory approach. Pollock's research particularly focuses on women's fears during pregnancy leading to labor and culminating with the relief of a safe delivery. Her book opens with the all too relatable stories of horror about still-birth, C-section, nausea, and pain that are regularly shared with pregnant women, shaping their entrance into motherhood. Another important text is religious studies scholar Pamela Klassen's *Blessed Events: Religion and Home Birth in America* (2001). This book explores the correlations between personal beliefs and un-medicated labor in the lives of North American women. Klassen beautifully documents stories drawn from a broad spectrum of religious communities, including Pentecostals, Old Order Amish, and Goddess spirituals, exploring how women



interpret birth through a religious lens and in turn draw from their home births meaningful beliefs that enrich their lives. Klassen's is the first in-depth study of its kind and is therefore significant in its own right. Unfortunately, despite an increased interdisciplinary interest in exploring birth through vernacular experiences, folklorists have failed to add to the broader conversation significantly.

Folklorists' study of childbirth dates to the nineteenth century when early folklorists and antiquarians documented birth superstitions. A few examples include divination practices that determine the gender of a fetus, remedies or techniques used by midwives and laboring women, and the traditional foodways of expectant mothers (see: childbirth and childrearing in *The Encyclopedia of Women's Folklore and Folklife*). Two nineteenth-century publications, *Myths and Legends of Our Own Land* by Charles Skinner and *Current Superstitions: Collected from the Oral Traditions of English Speaking States* by Anny Bergen, illustrate this kind of scholarship. Despite these early beginnings, however, contemporary scholarship on birth experiences has been sparse, and exceptions are notable. In 1987, nearly a decade before the publication of her book, Davies-Floyd published an article on the technological model of birth in the *Journal of American Folklore* making it all the more surprising that folklorists have not further engaged the subject. Other significant work includes Janet Elizabeth McNaughten's PhD dissertation which examines the rise and fall of midwifery in Newfoundland, Canada and Angela Ashurst McGee's article entitled "But Then Face to Face: Culture and Doctrine in Eight Pregnancy Narratives" which examines how Mormons "organize and reclaim the significance, beauty and power of their experience" through telling their narrative (1996, 138).

My Contributions

Located at the intersection of three areas of study just surveyed--vernacular religion, Mormon folklore, and birth—this thesis first, and perhaps most importantly, engages with the broader scholarship of women’s folklore (Greenhill and Tye 1997; Hollis 1993; Farrer 1975; Locke 2008; Radner 1993) and more specifically, of women’s vernacular religious lives. This includes examining a traditionally overlooked population in folklore studies: white, educated, middle-class women. Second, my thesis examines traditions performed by Mormon women within the home exploring “how women respond to the patriarchy of the church” through birth, both in sharing their stories and through the theological inventions embedded therein (Eliason and Mould 2014, 46).

Importantly, my research addresses birth, a neglected area of Mormon folklore studies. I worry that the lack of attention to birth within Mormon folklore scholarship, particularly because of the emphasis LDS place on family and procreation, highlights the invisibility of women’s work, or perhaps, more apropos, women’s *labor*. As historian Tammi J. Scheider so poignantly commented in the introduction to *Mormon Women Have Their Say: Essays from the Clermont Oral History Collection*, “Women’s voices, so common in domestic spaces, are rarely heard in the history of religions and their associated theologies and practice” (Bushman 2013, ix). Third, this work draws heavily on the work of Pamela Klassen. As discussed above, Klassen explores North American and home birth broadly. Like her, I am interested in the meaning-making that is integrally related to the ritual of birth. However, part of my goal is to more expansively map a single tradition and explore the implications of a group of women’s theological creativity. Lastly, my thesis examines the tradition of Mormon midwives. While history has become a topic of interest among Mormons, and will likely continue to gain both institutional and academic attention, my work is the first that I know of to explore the midwifery tradition as a continued

phenomenon in the LDS Church among contemporary birth workers. Such an exploration highlights the correlation that several of my contributors perceive as not only existing between their personal identities and the past but also between Mormon women's power and the past.

## Methodology

The data for this thesis comes from interviews I conducted in 2014 with twenty-one women ranging in age from twenty-three to fifty-five years. My interactions were predominantly confined to online communications (email, social media sites, and Facebook messenger), in addition to a distributed questionnaire. My contributors' vast geographic variance played a major role in forgoing face-to-face interviews as most contributors lived outside my state of residence. Time was also a major factor as my initial research was conducted and those findings disseminated during a six-week research fellowship at the Maxwell Institute of Religious Studies in Provo, Utah. While there are undoubtedly disadvantages in my methodology, my contributors willingly offered candid and detailed responses.

Participants answered one of two questionnaires. The first survey, distributed to mothers who chose an out-of-hospital (OOH) birth, addressed their basic birth preparations, individual labor experiences, and reasons for choosing an OOH birth. The second survey, distributed to birth workers—specifically midwives, student midwives, and doulas—addressed their education, preparations and approach, experiences, and reasons for pursuing a career in the field of maternal medicine or support. Both questionnaires focused on the impact religion had on their individual experiences with birth and the impact their birth experiences had on their religious beliefs if any. Of the twenty-one women who participated in this research, ten were mothers and eleven were birth workers. The latter consisted of five midwives, three students, and three doulas. Nine of the

eleven birth workers were also mothers. However, only three women opted to answer both questionnaires.

All the women who participated in this research were active members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) at the time of this study. They consisted of eighteen multigeneration Mormons and three converts. While they shared Mormonism as a lens through which they defined their experiences, my contributors varied in terms of social, political, and generational factors and as a result, the vernacular beliefs examined in this thesis are as diverse as the individuals who produced them.

Recruiting women for this study came with some ease, and I appreciate the numerous women who endorsed this project among friends and coworkers, online and in person. Many participants came by way of referral, eager to share their experience. I also appreciate the private and public social media groups that granted me membership to assist in the project. Membership in such groups as “LDS Holistic Sisters”

(<http://www.facebook.com/groups/HolisticLDSMoms/>), “LDS Midwives, Doulas and Other Birth Professionals” (<http://www.facebook.com/LDSbirthworkers/>), and “Latter-day Saint Birth Professionals of the World” (<http://www.facebook.com/groups/ldsbirthworkers/>) allotted me the unique opportunity to conduct fieldwork via social media. In some cases, these networks numbered into the thousands. While I predominantly visited these communities as a spectator (2014 to 2016), my time among the women was indeed insightful.

Finally, I extend my gratitude to the women in my life who agreed to not only rehash their stories but provide greater transparency in revealing the intimacies of their beliefs. Some of the women in this research are old friends; they are women who helped me prepare for and transition into motherhood and sparked an enduring interest that would continue into my formal

education. It has been my privilege to study as a scholar what they first shared with me as a confidant.

I recognize that there are certainly weaknesses in my reliance on email interviews and surveys. My work lacks some of the fluidity of face-to-face dialogue and cannot convey body language and the intonations that provide flesh to an interview. As I read my contributors' correspondence and survey responses, I wondered what these stories would have sounded like reverberating off the tongues of women in the very moment of their recollection. I have tried to maintain the integrity of each interview and conversation by transposing the text with exactitude, and I have been pleasantly surprised by the intimacy of their words and the passion conveyed in their use of capitalization, underlining, bold, italics, and punctuation. Below I include brief bibliographic information for each of the twenty-one women who graciously shared their stories. They are organized alphabetically and include information about their families, careers, education, and interest in home birth. For those women who were not recruited through an online forum, I explain my personal and professional acquaintance with each.

## Participant Biographies

### 1. Analiesa Leonhardt

Analiesa was born in 1983. She is a second-generation member of the LDS Church and self-defines as a “feminist or moderate liberal or intellectual” Mormon. Analiesa is a certified doula (2009), registered nurse (2011), and a student at the University of Utah enrolled in the Doctor of Nurse Practitioner Program. Analiesa described her path into birth care as “deliberate” and “thoughtful.” It was influenced by her university education, her service as a missionary in Ecuador where she provided doula service to a laboring mother, and her faith. Analiesa is a

newlywed. She is also the author of an article entitled, “The sacrament of Birth” in Square2, an online journal on LDS thought (see: <http://squaretwo.org>). I was introduced to Analiesa by Rachel Hunt-Steenblik, who has also contributed to this research.

## 2. Angela G.

Angela was born in 1975. She is a multigenerational member of the LDS Church and a mother of six. Of Angela’s six children, five were delivered with a midwife—two at home and three in a hospital. Angela referred to her first home birth as “transformative and empowering.” It was an experience that influenced her decision to pursue midwifery as a career. In 2012, Angela began her student training as a midwife.

## 3. Becky B.

Becky was born in the 1970s and is a multigenerational member of the LDS Church. For several years, Becky served as a Le Leche League leader providing breastfeeding support to nursing mothers (2004-2011) and is a student midwife. Becky has attended approximately one hundred births and is preparing to take her certification exam. She is also a mother of five. Of her children, four were born with a midwife—two at home and two in a hospital. Becky is the descendant of a Latter-day Saint midwife who lived in the LDS Mexican colonies, assisting both Latter-day Saints and local Mexican women. In her interview, Becky lamented the end of institutionally sanctioned midwifery in the LDS Church.

## 4. Elizabeth Murray

Elizabeth [Beth] was born in 1961. She is a second-generation member of the LDS Church. Beth is the mother of four. Of her children, two were delivered at home with a midwife and two in a hospital setting. Beth's decision to home birth was impacted by the rise of popularity in planned cesarean delivery during the 1980s, which she perceived as a negative development in maternal health care. Beth delivered her two oldest children under the care of a lauded midwife in St. Petersburg, Florida named Maora Jane "Skippy" King; a short excerpt on Skippy was published in the book *Feminists Who Changed America, 1963-1975*. Due to increased age and following the miscarriage of twins, Beth decided to deliver her two youngest in hospital. Olivia Garrison who has also participated in this research is her daughter.

#### 5. Chrissie Holmes

Chrissie was born in 1975 and is a multigenerational member of the LDS Church. She is the mother of seven children, all of whom were delivered at home with a midwife. Chrissie's decision to home birth was founded in a desire to birth unmedicated under the supervision of healthcare professionals who shared her birthing ideology. I was introduced to Chrissie by her sister Heather, a colleague I worked with during my fellowship at the Maxwell Institute of Religious Studies in 2014.

#### 6. Cynthia Tarnasky

Cynthia was born in 1981 and is a multigenerational member of the LDS Church. She is a mother of five. Of her children, the youngest three were delivered at home with a midwife. Cynthia's first two pregnancies resulted in induction under the recommendation of her

obstetrician. Cynthia sought home birth as an alternative, believing that natural birth was “optimal.”

#### 7. Danielle Chancellor-Checketts

Danielle was born in 1975 and is a fourth-generation member of the LDS Church. After suffering a miscarriage (1998), Danielle considered a career in midwifery. The following year, she became a childbirth educator. In 2001, Danielle began a formal apprenticeship under a midwife, which spanned the greater part of a decade. Danielle is a licensed and certified professional midwife and currently runs a practice out of her large two-story home in rural Utah. She is also the mother of ten children—four of whom are stepchildren. Of her biological offspring, five were delivered at home with a midwife and one in a hospital. I hired Danielle in 2014 as my birth care provider. She delivered my second son in January of 2015. I invited Danielle to participate in this research only after our professional agreement had ended.

#### 8. Diana Janopaul

Diana was born in 1961 and was converted to the LDS Church in her late 30s. Diana felt “called” to the profession of midwifery after reading Ina May Gaskin’s *Spiritual Midwifery* when she was 19 years old. Diana is a licensed and certified professional midwife in Tallahassee, Florida. Diana is also the mother of four. Of her children, two were delivered in a hospital with certified nurse midwives, however, both deliveries resulted in cesarean sections, one was delivered at home as a VBAC (vaginal birth after C-section) under the care of Ina May Gaskin at the Farm Midwifery Center—a renowned commune and one of the first birthing centers in the United States. The story of her initial VBAC is included in Gaskin’s *Guide to Childbirth* (2003). Diana



delivered her fourth child in a hospital after being transferred from home following multiple hours of labor. I was introduced to Diana by her client, Melissa Nelms, who has also contributed to this research.

#### 9. Elizabeth Smith

Elizabeth was born in 1959 and is a multigenerational member of the LDS Church. She has been in private practice as a midwife for over twenty-six years, and according to her website, she has attended over 1,200 successful births (see: <http://www.babybizliz.com/about-liz/>). While Elizabeth initially set out to earn a degree in nursing, the birth of her third child—her first experience with home birth—inspired her to pursue a career in midwifery. Elizabeth descends from a long line of prominent midwives. She currently resides in Southern Utah. Elizabeth is also the mother of eight. Of her children, the first two were delivered in a hospital and the remaining six at home.

#### 10. Jenetta Billhimer

Jenetta was born in 1971 and is a multigenerational member of the LDS Church. She is the author of *Wise Childbearing, What You'll Want to Know as You Make Your Birth Choices* and is a certified doula. She is also the mother of six. Of her children, two were delivered in a hospital via cesarean section with certified nurse midwives and four at home with midwives (one certified and three direct entry professionals).

#### 11. Jenne Alderks

Jenne was born in 1984. She converted to the LDS Church at the age of seventeen and is a graduate of Brigham Young University. Jenne earned a BS in Marriage, Family and Human Development (2005) and a M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education (2008). In 2001, she began attending births as a certified doula. Jenne published an article in *Sunstone Magazine* entitled “Rediscovering the Legacy of Mormon Midwives” (2012). She also runs the website:

[www.birthinginzion.org](http://www.birthinginzion.org), a directory for LDS women seeking local LDS birth professionals.

Jenne is a mother of three. Of her children, one was born in a hospital with a CNM and two at home with a licensed midwife. I was introduced to Jenne by Karin Hardman, who has also contributed to this research.

#### 12. Karin Hardman

Karin was born in 1978 and is a sixth-generation member of the LDS Church. She is the mother of seven living children. Of her children, five were born at home with a midwife and two in a hospital. Karin’s first child was also born in a hospital but was stillborn. Karin is an International Board of Lactation Consultant Examiner (ILBCE)—a nationally accredited breastfeeding consultant and educator. I have known Karin for over a decade and was employed by Karin as a nanny to her, then, four children (2008-2010). Karin is the eldest sister of Kirsten Hutchison, who has also contributed to this research. She currently resides in Mississippi.

#### 13. Kayte Brown

Kayte was born in 1986 and is a multigenerational member of the LDS Church. At twenty-one, Kayte served an LDS mission in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Following in her mother’s footsteps, Kayte became a certified doula in 2011. That same year, Kayte also commenced her training as a

midwife and is currently a certified midwife. Kayte is the great-great-granddaughter of early Mormon midwife Sarah Indiaetta Young. I was introduced to Kayte by Rachel Hunt-Steenblik.

#### 14. Kirsten Hutchison

Kirsten was born in 1985 and is a multigenerational member of the LDS Church. She is the mother of two, both of who were delivered in a birth center with a midwife. Kirsten is one of my closest confidants. She and I served as companions in the United States Missionary Training Center (MTC) (2007) and as missionary colleagues the following year and a half in Sendai, Japan. Kirsten is Karin Hardman's youngest sister.

#### 15. Lizz Pope

Lizz was born in 1988. While raised in the LDS Church, Lizz went through a period of inactivity spanning nearly eight years. At 21 years old, Lizz returned to Mormonism. She is the mother of two children, both of whom were delivered at home with a midwife. I met Lizz in 2010 in Tallahassee, Florida, where we attended the Tallahassee 4<sup>th</sup> Ward congregation for more than two years. She currently resides in Massachusetts.

#### 16. Melanie Lennon

Melanie was born in 1963 and is a second-generation member of the LDS Church. In 2007, she became a certified doula and in 2013, a licensed and certified professional midwife. Melanie's path to midwifery was inspired after her residential state, Wyoming, legalized midwifery (2010). She is the mother of three children, all who were born in a hospital.

#### 17. Melissa Nelms

Melissa was born in 1984 and converted to the LDS Church at the age of thirteen. She is a mother of two children, both of whom were born at home with a midwife. Melissa is also a birth educator and doula, a career inspired by her personal experiences with home birth. I met Melissa in 2010 in Tallahassee, Florida, where we attended the Tallahassee 4<sup>th</sup> Ward congregation for more than two years. She currently resides in Tennessee.

#### 18. Olivia Garrison

Olivia was born in 1987 and is a multigenerational member of the LDS Church. She is the mother of one child who was delivered in a hospital after laboring multiple hours at home with a midwife. Olivia earned an MA in social work from Florida State University. I met Olivia in 2010 in Tallahassee, Florida, where we attended the Tallahassee 4<sup>th</sup> Ward congregation for more than two years. Olivia is the daughter of Elizabeth Murray.

#### 19. Rachel Hunt-Steenblik

Rachel was born in 1984 and is a multigenerational member of the LDS Church. She is the mother of two, both of whom were born at home with midwives. Rachel is a Ph.D. student at Claremont University in philosophy. She co-edited *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings* (2015) and authored *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* (2017). In 2014, Rachel and I were graduate fellows at the Maxwell Institute of Religious Studies. The initial dissemination of this research occurred at Brigham Young University where Rachel was a fellow panelist.

## 20. Sofie Jacobs

Sofia was born in 1994 and is a multigenerational member of the LDS Church. Sofie is a student midwife at the Midwives College of Utah (2012-present). Sofie decided to become a midwife after assisting in the birth of her dog's ten puppies. At the time of our interview, Sofie was expecting her first child and planned to have a midwife assisted home birth.

## 21. Tessa Rosale

Tessa was born in 1990 and was raised in the LDS church. She is the mother of two children, both of whom were born at home with a midwife.

## Home birth As Subversion

The remainder of this chapter explores the subversive subtext of my contributors' narratives, the historical conflict between obstetrics and midwifery and my contributors' opposition to the technological model of birth. These three areas of focus give way to a more holistic portrait of the women in this research, their words, and the prominent reasons why they have chosen home birth.

## Subversive Narratives

Throughout history, women rarely have told their own stories, at least in an official capacity. They have either been told by or, worse yet, silenced by men of power. However, women's voices complicate the institutional narrative and dispel the old version—the grand narrative. In sharing their stories about birth, they offer female perspectives that highlight both injustices in modern obstetrics and gaping lacunas in Mormon discourse. The term *master*

*narrative* or *grand narrative* was first coined by French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) to refer to a society or culture's preexisting historical or ideological framework. It refers to totalizing narratives that tend to overlook local interpretations by projecting cultural homogeneity. A grand narrative privileges institutions of power, which predominantly control the narrative and can marginalize vulnerable communities or individuals who fail to assimilate within the established boundaries properly. In other words, grand narratives are "the stories we tell ourselves" and the stories that we are told "to explain the world we live in" (Prickett 2002, 18). Personal narrative, on the other hand, or what Lyotard referred to as "little narrative," is an important tool that has been utilized at both etic and emic levels to deconstruct and broaden conventional understandings of what is and is not acceptable (Prickett 2002, 18). While personal narratives empower the individual, they also challenge the master narrative. In this way, story is a subversive text that can unseat monolithic thinking by offering alternative perspectives.

Throughout my research, I have been struck by the subversive nature of contemporary LDS birth lore. As women narrate their births, they participate in a dialectic between the institutional and the individual. While these narratives might openly question patriarchal aspects of the faith, to a greater extent they subtly create spaces for alternative thought, which in turn is positioned within official discourse. For instance, when a mother refers to her birth experience as symbolic of the suffering Christ, she is drawing from the institutional narrative while simultaneously carving out a novel space for LDS mothers. With her words, she further develops the image of women's sanctity and utility within the institutional text.

It is important to note that my contributors' words are not necessarily intentional acts of subversion, however. The meaning they ascribe to labor and birth was extracted from their memories of an intense anguish and an indescribable joy. And yet, their words challenge the

bounds of theology and carve from ambiguity meaningful discourse about women. Elaine Lawless, who examines subversive subtexts in her research on female pastoral figures, has argued that “the speaking presence of women in religious contexts deconstructs and challenges the efficacy” of the religious master narrative (2003, 73). That is, women often find themselves to be subversive in patriarchal settings without making a deliberate effort to be so.

However, whether a woman supports or opposes the sacred narrative of her faith, storytelling becomes one way she assumes power. Margaret K. Brady, who examined Mormon women’s visionary narratives, writes:

Storytelling becomes a way for women to move beyond the bounds of cultural and religious authoritarianism. For instance, a close friend once explained that she'd felt inspired to pursue her education rather than make preparations for a third child. In this same way, even when women choose to align with a cultural expectation (i.e., delay a career for the purpose of raising her children) storytelling provides a means for usurping power by making the choice her own (2013, 215).

Agency, as Brady alludes, is an important theme in women's personal religious narratives that I attempt to trace and analyze throughout this thesis.

In this study, I examine two different subversive discourses present in my contributors’ narratives. The first relates to how some women have interpreted the Mormon past and adopted the legacy of early pioneering LDS women. My discussion highlights the subversive nature of invoking the little narrative, the stories of women marginalized by the epic histories of male heroes prominently situated within the Mormon church’s institutional narrative. My second example focuses on the ways in which Mormon women carve vernacular theologies about womanhood from their experiences with childbirth. Their stories are responses to the lack of a

succinct theology on Mormon women's authority. The dialogue embedded within these personal narratives reveals women's search for place and purpose in the LDS faith.

My contributors are also participating in a third act of subversion that is informed by but extends beyond their Mormon faith. While it is perhaps their most obvious act of subversion, the ways in which it relates to my contributor's religiosity may be less clear. Here I refer to participants' resistance to the biomedical approach to labor. While Mormonism tends to be viewed as a conservative religion with distinct separations from contemporary secular society, the divide between Mormon thought and American culture is certainly far from impermeable. The women in this study have been influenced by the popularity of natural birth in twenty-first century America and its push against medical interventions (e.g., C-sections and inducing labor) and medicated birth. They have embraced a feminism associated with modern "alternative" birth practices which emphasizes female assistance and champions empowerment by allowing women to take control of their own birthing experience and to trust in the strength of their own bodies.

Anthropologist Bryan Turner (1992) has argued that the body is a form upon which meaning is ascribed. Echoing Turner, religion scholar Sarah Coakley asserted that the body "is a socially constructed artifact rather like other cultural products. The body (its image, its bearing, and representation) is the effect of innumerable practices, behaviours, and discourses which construct and produce the body as a culturally recognizable feature of social relations" (1997, 19). While this is true, the body is also a conduit of power for contesting grand narratives and a form from which meaning is extrapolated. Below I explore how the competing fields of obstetrics and midwifery relate polarizing messages to women and how midwives empower their clientele to refute the master narrative of women's biological inferiority.



## Biomedical Birth and Women's Bodies

Much of what we associate with modern obstetrical practices can be traced to Chicago physician Joseph B. DeLee, who in 1904 published one of the most influential textbooks in obstetrical history. He argued that labor and delivery should be approached as pathology. In fact, in a later publication, DeLee compared women to female salmon, which die “after spawning,” alleging that if birth was a natural process then laboring women's mortality was as well (1920, 40). He implemented innovative techniques intended to predict and manage the common risks of pregnancy, routinizing medical intervention and extending greater control to attending physicians. While a balanced discussion of DeLee's influence must acknowledge his contribution, some attribute his approach to alienating women from their very bodies. Women were considered unqualified and, therefore, too afraid to make decisions.

Robbie Davies-Floyd, the medical and cultural anthropologist, mentioned above, argues in *Birth as an American Rite of Passage*, that the technocratic model tends to define female bodies in biological opposition to male bodies. She writes,

Because of their extreme deviation from the male prototype, uniquely female anatomical features such as the uterus, ovaries, and breast, and uniquely female biological processes such as menstruation, pregnancy, birth, and menopause are inherently subject to malfunction. . . . In short, under the technocratic model the female body is viewed as an abnormal, unpredictable, and inherently defective machine. (1986, 53)

There are many factors that have shaped the field of obstetrics, including the high death toll so commonly associated with birth in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but patriarchal thinking was an integral component that once embedded, remained. Women were extracted from the medical equation as decision-makers, and largely as professionals, as a result

of physicians' campaign to eradicate midwifery (Lusero 2104, 414). Rhetoric regarding the dangers of childbirth and the abnormalities of women's anatomy preyed on women's fears and resulted in alienating patients from professionals, leaving women vulnerable to the authority of predominantly male physicians.

Davies-Floyd points out that these ideas are reified in the rituals of hospital birth, acculturating women into their *proper* place in society. She argues,

Hospital procedures provide an ordered structure to the chaotic flow of the birth process; in doing so, they both enhance the affectivity of that process and create a sense of inevitability about their performance. Obstetrical interventions are also transformative in intent. At the same time they attempt to contain and control the inherently transformative process of birth, they also transform the birthing woman into a mother in the full social sense of the word—that is, into a woman who has internalized the core values of American society: one who believes in science, relies on technology, recognizes her inferiority (either consciously or unconsciously), and so at some level accepts the principle of patriarchy. Such woman will tend to conform to society's dictates and meet the demands of its institution, as in deed most women do (1986, 153).

The use of a wheelchair, hospital bed, enemas, fetal monitoring, Pitocin, and forceps all point to a women's inadequacies. Whether a mother recognizes the encoded message is not important. Women internalize and are shaped by them. As I explore later in the chapter, some of the women in this research resisted these messages through choosing a midwife in lieu of a doctor. However, many women rejected the hospital's approach only after one or more negative experiences.

The hospital's control over the birth market was another way women's choices were regulated, and legislation often hindered women's efforts to gain control. While the rituals of

hospital birth may have been particularly easy for women in the early to mid-twentieth century to accept as they coincided with American ideals, the feminist movement later brought those ideals into question. And while hospitals would continue to dominate the space of birth, feminism opened the doors for others to encroach.

The growth of obstetrics and hospital births meant that by the rise of the 1960s, less than 5% of babies were delivered by midwives, and of that number, the majority were born into poor non-white families who relied on lower cost care (Lindheim 1981, 4). Midwife certification programs had slowly made their way to the United States, but the medical field slowed growth by lobbying against midwives, claiming that their methods were unsubstantiated and dangerous, and refusing pre-natal care to women planning a midwife assisted home birth (Robbins 1998, 67).

However, beginning in the 1960s and 70s women began to protest the medicalization of birth. Historian Lauri Umansky pointed out that this era, noted for the rise of the feminist left and advocacy for legalized abortion, also engendered a robust discussion of women's healthcare. She argued, "early feminists plumbed every topic from the mythical vaginal orgasm, to abortion and birth control rights, to the history of gynecological and obstetrical abuses, to the liberator potential of natural birthing practices" (1996, 60). Umansky explains that while there was not a universal feminist agenda, the variation of women's concerns fell under a sense of "bodily self-determination" (1996, 60).

Women had little power in the political arena, but they could share their stories. Those stories would eventually bring about change. Narratives of trauma that openly criticized the use of harsh sedatives, restraints, and mechanisms such as forceps and episiotomy scalpels, began to shed light on the victimization of laboring women, empowering some to reclaim the birth

process for themselves (Klassen 2002, 29). Midwifery then reemerged as a bastion of women's rights and standing in distinct contrast with obstetrics.

Where obstetrics reaffirmed patriarchy, midwifery extended women the freedom of self-definition. As Umansky argues, the polemic divide between midwifery and obstetrics hinged on oppositional beliefs about women's bodies:

If traditional obstetrics treated the body of the laboring woman as so many separate and pathologized parts, midwifery, according to its feminist advocates, operated on the premise that the body, in labor as in everyday life, was both healthy and whole. Whereas the paraphernalia of traditional hospital birth placed women in a kind of purdah, hidden behind drapes and curtains as if the female body performing its natural function were somehow dirty or shameful, home birth advocates stressed the health, strength, and beauty of the laboring woman. Midwives described the swollen perineum of the final stage of labor, which typically sent doctors scurrying for the episiotomy tools, as a marvel of human elasticity . . . midwives redefined women's bodies in general, and women's bodies giving birth, as normal and capable (1996, 66).

In other words, if a woman was told she was powerful or powerless, these messages shaped her. As Barbara Katz Rothman wrote, "birth is not only about making babies. Birth also is about making mothers—strong, competent capable mothers, who trust themselves and know their inner strength" (1996, 254). This was the message of the alternative birth movement. Midwives wanted to turn obstetrics on its head by redefining the space of birth. For the first time, women were being encouraged to know their bodies. Women's education was a major facet of the women's healthcare movement, which closely aligned with the agenda of alternative birthers.

Education was a tool used by both factions; obstetrics used it to ensure subservience, while midwifery used it to empower.

The relationship between spirituality and birth also emerged in many early feminist writings about natural childbirth. Ina May Gaskin's *Spiritual Midwifery*, referred to earlier, is likely the most recognized; it contended that the spiritual evanescence of birth was being threatened by technology. The spirituality that Gaskin and others referred to, however, was less associated with institutional religion and more closely aligned with women's liberation. Spiritual birth, at least in part, referred to the mystical self-revelation that women were powerful creators with indubitable inner strength and beauty. An un-medicated laboring body could be the expression of women's limitless potential.

There were other factors that impacted the growth of midwifery in the United States from the 1960s, including the countercultural movement that helped midwives to reestablish legitimacy among women. After all, midwifery was anti-establishmentarian and embraced homeopathy and nature, all interests of the rising generation of counter culturalists (Umansky 1996, 76). That increasing numbers of women had access to a university education that encouraged critical thinking was perhaps another factor in midwifery's growing popularity. These cultural shifts, which all attributed to the expansion of women's political power, provide a basis for understanding the traditions from which my contributors intentionally and unintentionally draw.

### Mormon Women and Holistic Birth

One question of interest is why Mormon women turn to midwifery over more mainstream obstetrics. Why deliver at a birth center or, perhaps more precarious, at home when a hospital is

available? It should be stated at the outset that Latter-day Saint women are fully integrated members of society and in fact, most of them deliver in hospitals in sync with trends among the broader population. My sampling comes from a small, although growing, niche among the LDS population. There is no statistical research that I am aware of regarding the percentage of Mormon women who opt for OOH birth. However, in the state of Utah, which contains the headquarters of the LDS Church and where Mormons account for nearly 60% of the population, trends tend to run parallel with that of the United States as a whole. A 2015 article in the *Deseret News*—a popular Utah periodical—reported that according to the state’s Department of Health, 2.7% of births occur out of the hospital, which accounts for “three to four each day” (Oligschlaeger 2015). Midwife participants practicing in the state of Utah reported that Latter-day Saint women made up the majority of their clientele (Smith 2014). While I am reluctant to draw any hard conclusion based on my small research sample, the number of Mormon women embracing alternative birth methods and care appears to be growing. My query, however, relates not to the growth of midwifery and home births but to the reasons why my contributors have rejected a modern medical approach in favor of what some might refer to as a fringe practice.

Many of my contributors referred to the hospital’s approach as being counter to their personal beliefs. Specifically, they noted that a woman’s body, pregnancy, and birth were divinely designed, a pretext that hospitals simply did not honor. Mothers expressed their fears of cascading intervention, especially the possibility of C-section, and the dilution of intimacy and choice regarding baby and body. Some women’s beliefs and expectations regarding hospitals and obstetricians originated with narratives shared by friends and family that highlighted the horrors of hospital care and the empowerment of alternative methods. Others researched their available

options, interviewing obstetricians and midwives and visiting hospitals and birth centers.

Chrissie Holmes described her search for maternity care during the pregnancy of her first child:

[I] went to a doctor when first expecting and talked to him about natural childbirth and I didn't like his reaction. It was like he was scoffing at me for even thinking about having the baby naturally. He acted like what is the point when you have the option of medication? I then went to a meeting hosted by some midwives and other women who have had home births. I was overcome with a feeling of peace and calm and realized that this was something that I was supposed to do, and what I could do. It was a vastly different feeling with the doctor who really seemed to brush me aside. I don't like the idea of being "sick." Birthing in your own environment helped me realize that my body was capable of doing this. I also don't like how certain "interventions" at hospitals can cause complications in birth. I have had seven healthy children and no complications at home, (Holmes 2014)

Chrissie's worldview did not align with the technocratic model. While she believed her body was capable and desired to be lucid during labor, her doctor did not see the value in forgoing an epidural. The contest between birth methodologies is not simply about safety or creating a memorable experience; it is also about establishing control. The doctor does this by asserting his medical expertise as opposed to the woman who must assert her expertise by displaying confidence in her body and the very nature of birth.

More than half of the mothers I interviewed sought alternative care only after their demands for ownership had been ignored following a disappointing—or worse, traumatic—

experience. For example, Karin Hardman explained that she discovered home birth only after the birth of her third child:

After three terrible births—one stillbirth—I looked at birth outside of a hospital setting. I knew that God had made my body and He had designed it to work. I knew that He wanted me to have more children if it was at all possible. So, I started looking outside of the hospital model of care. I was also prompted *very* specifically when I became pregnant with my third child that I was to stay away from the hospital and from other doctors. I was led throughout the entire pregnancy to make the choices I did for a more non-interventive birth experience (Hardman 2014).

Karin's viable births had ended in C-section, and as is customary hospital protocol, her physician assessed that future pregnancies would yield the same result. She would require invasive surgery on her incompetent body. However, Karin refused the diagnosis and gave birth to the remainder of her children naturally at home without any major complications. Referring to her first vaginal birth after C-section (VBAC) she recalled:

It was a very spiritual experience with that pregnancy. I knew things needed to be different and I knew I would be guided. And I was. That pregnancy taught me that birth can indeed be spiritual and subsequent births were even more so (Hardman 2014).

Narratives like Karin's are potent examples of resistance and subversion. They are stories of reclamation. The prologue introduces tragedy, but as the story develops, tragedy is transformed, and the heroine finds resolution in the sanctity of birth and the reassurance that her body is capable and is her own.

Labor is, undoubtedly, a fleeting experience that makes up only a few hours or days of a woman's life. At the same time, it is a formative event with lasting implications. In hospitals,



laboring women are taught to be pliable and obedient; they are disenfranchised by the power differential between patient and professional. In the biomedical model, intellectual or cultural capital (e.g., the prestige of a medical degree or a doctor's position in the hospital) is used to maintain control. As Becky B. asserted in reference to the in-hospital birth of her first child, “[I] felt like autonomy was removed from me” (B., 2014).

The power of personal narrative for a woman, then, is the ability to reclaim control through forging a counter-narrative, one in which she is empowered, resists, and reclaims. In Becky's concluding remarks, she comments, “I am really glad I took birth back and I feel like a person with autonomy [again]” (B., 2014). Becky gave birth to the remainder of her children at home and, at the time of our interview, was a student midwife preparing for her certification exams.

## Chapter Outline

The rest of this thesis looks more closely at the experiences of Mormon women around home birth. The analysis begins in Chapter Two by exploring 19<sup>th</sup>-century traditions of Mormon midwifery and the proliferation of women's vernacular theologies in Nauvoo, Illinois. This discussion provides a foundation for the following chapter that specifically focuses on several contemporary birth workers who trace their identities to the lives and experiences of early LDS midwives. It also explores a period of Mormon history in which women's participation in the church was rapidly expanding, and the grassroots theological inventions of Mormon women were flourishing. I argue that these two traditions, while predominantly dismantled in the turn of the twentieth century through the rise of obstetrics and the Americanization of Mormonism, carry forward in the lives of contemporary Latter-day Saint women.

Chapter Three examines the stories of three birth workers—Jenne, Kayte and Elizabeth—whose cultural remembrances and unique genealogical lines play a significant part in how they have come to define themselves. Here I also explore the role of nostalgia in narrative and women's quest for visibility in the historical record of the church.

Chapter Four considers the vernacular beliefs that enlarge the theological walls of Mormonism to make room for women. I explore several important themes that emerge in my contributors' narratives such as women's roles in the afterlife and the sanctification of women through natural childbirth.

The thesis concludes with Chapter Five that sums up the main findings of each of the earlier chapters. I argue that the vernacular theologizing of my contributors speaks to a broader tradition embedded within Mormonism as first introduced by the church's founder Joseph Smith Jr.

First, however, it is important to provide a brief history of midwifery as a church-sanctioned occupation among Mormons. Beginning in Nauvoo, Illinois in the late 1830s and 1840s, midwifery developed during a period of great theological growth that provided women with greater autonomy than has been realized before or since. Importantly, this is an era that my contemporary contributors draw on in their quest for identity. The historical beginnings of Mormon midwifery is the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO

### HISTORICAL FOUNDATION: WOMEN'S THEOLOGY IN NAUVOO

#### Mormonism: A Brief Introduction

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is a Christian restoration church. Adherents believe the church is a continuation of the original religious organization established by Jesus Christ over 2,000 years ago restored through the prophet Joseph Smith Jr. on April 6, 1830. Theologically, Mormons are nontrinitarian and believe the Godhood consists of three separate and distinct beings. Church doctrine also teaches the existence of a female counterpart to God the Father, referred to as Heavenly Mother, although it is unclear how exactly she fits into the traditional Christian schema. Central to LDS thought is the eternal nature of marriage which is exemplified in these divine parents. Related to this is the belief that faithful members will be exalted, as gods and goddesses, if they are obedient and receive salvific ordinances including marriage in an LDS temple.

The original temple, which Smith viewed as a space of worship, education and order, was constructed in Kirtland, Ohio. It was distinct in design and purpose from future temples as it was regularly used for preaching and for the secular education of God's people. A second temple was constructed in Nauvoo, Illinois in 1846, and was set apart primarily for the administration of sacred rituals and ordinances including (1) ceremonial washing and anointing of initiates' bodies; (2) the "endowment," a ritual drama in which neophytes make covenants with God and symbolically enter the afterlife; and (3) familial "sealings" or the ceremonial binding of married couples and their children in eternal unions. Today, there are 159 operating temples which are open only to members who pass worthiness interviews.

Latter-day Saints also believe in an open canon. Their scriptures currently consist of four standard works: the Holy Bible, the Book of Mormon, the Pearl of Great Price and the Doctrine and Covenants. The latter three are books of scripture revealed through the prophet Joseph Smith; the Book of Mormon and the Pearl of Great Price are considered historical texts translated through the power of God, while the Doctrine and Covenants consists of Smith's direct revelations.

Mormons also believe in apostolic succession and modern revelation through a prophetic head. The global leadership of the church consists of a first presidency (a president, who is recognized as the prophet of the Church, and two counselors), twelve apostles, and several large executive bodies known as quorums of the seventies. At the local level, congregations are broken down into wards and stakes (the equivalent of a Roman Catholic parish and diocese) with bishops and stake presidents presiding over their respective bodies. At the local and regional levels, all positions are held by lay clergy.

Male members, ages twelve and on, are eligible to be ordained into the priesthood and all presiding global and local leaders are priesthood holders. Women do not hold priesthood but are members of a women's philanthropic and religious organization known as the Relief Society. The organization meets for worship, and religious education as one of the three standard meetings held each Sunday. In addition to weekly worship, local bodies also meet monthly, and the global body gathers semi-annually. Women do hold local and global leadership positions in the Relief Society, as well as in auxiliaries that direct the youth of the church, such as the Young Women's organization (girls ages twelve to eighteen) and the nursery and primary program (boys and girls ages eighteen months to eleven years), but still report to and are directed by their respective priesthood authorities. This means men are in a particularly privileged position. The

words of male leadership are often considered revelatory while the words of female leaders are perceived as advice.

Especially pertinent to this study is the belief that mankind existed as spirits previous to their mortal births. Receiving a body is an essential part of God's plan, which allows men and women to progress through the experiences of mortality and prove their obedience by accepting and following the gospel of Jesus Christ. Men and women should seek God through "personal" revelation (see: Mould 2011).

While today the headquarters of the church are located in Salt Lake City, Utah, the earliest body originated in western New York. The Church established communities in Missouri and Ohio, but after being forcibly removed from Missouri and the collapse of the Ohio congregation, the Saints took refuge in Illinois. In 1844, five years after their arrival in Illinois, Smith was assassinated. Soon after the Saints would seek out a remote location in the Intermountain West, ultimately settling on modern-day Utah and the surrounding region. Today the global body is made up of 16 million members.

The majority of this chapter examines a relatively brief period of that journey beginning in Nauvoo, Illinois, and leading into the earliest years of the Church's westward expansion. This is a theologically significant era and one that my contributors look to as a source for interpreting their place in Mormonism. While women's vernacular theologies do not necessarily derive from this period, women's beliefs and spiritual gifts flourished both privately and openly in Nauvoo. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a foundation for understanding women's roles in the church and, in particular, the unique theological lens that developed early on. This is a lens that has been adopted by some but clearly perpetuated by all of my contributors in their

interpretations of women's power. These vernacular theologies will be explored more in depth in Chapters Three and Four, but the creative prowess of Mormon women is established here.

Second, I examine the early history of Mormon attitudes toward birth. This chapter traces the tradition of midwifery as a pseudo-ecclesiastical position in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from Joseph Smith to his successor Brigham Young. While it was wholly dissipated around the turn of the twentieth century, this unique incarnation of women's authority sheds light upon significant shifts in Mormonism that created stronger divisions between women's responsibilities and those of the priesthood. As tensions developed, women's voices in favor of female autonomy matured alongside patriarchal discourses promoted by male Church leaders. This section provides a historical foundation to Chapter Three which examines the unique ties that exist between the work and beliefs of Mormonism's foremothers and that of contemporary LDS birth workers and mothers.

#### The Development of Women's Vernacular Theologies and Practices in Nauvoo, Illinois

In 1839, the threat of state-sponsored violence in Missouri, under Governor Lilburn Boggs's infamous "extermination order," forced the Latter-day Saints to flee their homes and find asylum in Illinois. The refugees purchased extensive tracts of land along the Mississippi River on which they would establish their own city, Nauvoo. With the success of proselytization efforts in Great Britain bringing converts to the new city, Nauvoo became a thriving metropolis numbering over twelve thousand residents by 1845. During this era of population growth and relative stability, Mormonism evolved religiously as well, incorporating new rituals and theology.

The Nauvoo period (1839–45) was an era of great spiritual expression and innovation. For example, Joseph Smith Jr. formally introduced to his followers the idea of human deification or what he referred to as “exaltation.” In 1844, Smith declared in a public sermon that “God himself was once as we are now, and is an exalted man, and sits enthroned in yonder heavens!...and you have got to learn how to be Gods yourselves” (Discourses 1844, 6). This teaching transformed and expanded the Saints’ image of God, but also of mankind, beings which Smith described as possessing propitious potential and power. Women, too, were integrated into the expanding cosmology in an unprecedented manner. Two innovations, the founding of the Relief Society and the introduction of temple ritual, played a profound role in elevating women. These and other such developments resulted in a greater degree of autonomy and, for a brief period, offered some women positions of authority akin to their male counterparts. In this context, Mormon cosmology expanded to embrace human deification not only for men but for women as well. The image of a heavenly mother figure, a female divine, placed women as a crucial component of Mormon mythology. In fact, even the controversial introduction of polygyny—or what the Saints termed “plural marriage,” which may have had many negative impacts on women—cultivated female networks in which vernacular beliefs and practices thrived.

The following section explores these three innovations: (1) the development of the Nauvoo Relief Society, (2) the construction of the Nauvoo temple and development of ritual and (3) the introduction and practice of polygamy. While other forces may have encouraged women’s theological creativity, these three developments are of unique importance.

The Nauvoo Relief Society

The Relief Society was formed on March 17, 1842, on the second floor of Joseph Smith's mercantile store in Nauvoo. While presently the international society encompasses the entirety of women's membership in the LDS Church, the initial meeting consisted of a mere twenty. Three men were also in attendance: Joseph Smith and apostles John Taylor and Willard Richards (*Nauvoo Relief Society* 1842, 6). The Relief Society started in the wake of other women's benevolent societies around the nation. Two women, Sarah M. Kimball and seamstress Margaret A. Cook, initially envisioned founding the society as a means to assist men working on the construction of the Nauvoo Temple by providing them with freshly sewn shirts. Not surprisingly, as women organized, their first contribution to Mormonism was domestic, following the era's gender norms.

The sisters, as Mormon women referred to one another, turned to Eliza R. Snow, a talented writer and poet, to draft a constitution that they presented to the Mormon prophet. When he heard their proposition, Joseph Smith expressed adulation over their efforts but rejoined with his own vision, insisting that the women were to be organized "under the priesthood after the pattern of the priesthood" (Kimball 1833). The meaning of his statement is not entirely clear, but it stressed the society's significance. "The pattern of the priesthood" may have referred to the structure of individual priesthood quorums (that is, committees of priesthood holders organized under the leadership of a presidency). The earliest minutes of the society shed light on the type of institution Smith envisioned and, more broadly, on the potential it held for furthering women's involvement in the Church.

The prophet's wife Emma Smith, who was chosen as the society's first president, selected two sisters, Sarah Cleveland and Elizabeth Ann Whitney, as counselors. Joseph Smith commissioned them "to preside over the Society . . . as the [First] Presidency, preside over the



church” (*Nauvoo Relief Society* 1842, 7). Significantly, this was the first time in Mormon history that women held ecclesiastical authority, even if it was limited to a female organization. It contributed to a greater level of autonomy for women in Nauvoo, as well as to the evolving place of women in Nauvoo’s religious practice. The society redefined women’s roles in relationship to the priesthood, which was exclusively male, and to broader society. It introduced new folk groups or circles that allowed for grassroots innovation. As an official institution, the Relief Society allowed women of the Church to take office, lead and collaborate with priesthood leaders, and gain increased visibility. As a folk group, the society fostered the women’s creativity, collective collaboration, and regular performance and expression of belief, which established a solidarity that lengthened women’s reach and expanded their rights.

The society’s growth was rapid, leading to the induction of over eleven hundred members in Nauvoo (Newel and Avery 1994, 117). Meetings provided a setting where women regularly preached and taught one another according to their convictions, things that were unable to do at most other church meetings. They focused on answering the temporal needs of the community through collecting donations and laying the groundwork for charitable efforts (Derr, Holbrook, & Grow 2016, xxvii).

While the organization often hosted priesthood leaders, the women regularly conducted their own meetings. The society’s minute book details how the sisterhood became a crucial part of the religious lives of those women who were selected for membership. Specifically, members of the Relief Society came to practice a more charismatic Mormonism in female circles—not simply in their meetings but also in women’s homes. This was most evident in the reintroduction of glossolalia which had all but died by the time the society was organized. In an April 19, 1842, meeting, Sarah Cleveland initiated the practice’s revival. The following is an excerpt from the

Relief Society minute book:

Cleveland stated that she many times felt in her heart, what she could not express in our own language, and as the Prophet had given us liberty to improve the gifts of the gospel in our meetings, and feeling the power resting upon [her], desired to speak in tongues; which she did in a powerful manner. Mrs. Sessions arose and gave the interpretation of what Councillor C. had spoken in an unknown tongue, and said that God was well pleas'd with this Society, that if we would be humble and faithful the Lord would pour out upon the members generally the gift of prophecy. (*Nauvoo Relief Society* 1842, 32)

Cleveland alluded to an unrecorded statement by Smith in which he granted women permission to utilize spiritual gifts. His declaration initiated the resurgence of tongue speaking among Mormon women, but also the proliferation of other spiritual talents. For example, during a meeting held on June 23, a Mrs. Chase "prophesied that henceforth, if the sisters are faithful, the gifts of the gospel shall be with us, especially the gift of healing— &c. &c" (*Nauvoo Relief Society* 1842, 69).

At times the sisters experienced backlash from male critics uncomfortable with the sister's adoption of charismatic practices. Some discouraged speaking in tongues in general, although they often considered performing healing blessings an acceptable gift of the spirit—as long as it was employed by male priesthood holders. Smith, however, encouraged the sisters' gifts and defended their zeal. Responding to their critics, Smith quoted from the Gospel of Mark, verses 17–18: "Go ye into all the world" &c.—no matter who believeth; these signs, such as healing the sick, casting out devils &c. should follow all that believe whether male or female. . . it is the privilege of those set apart to administer in that authority which is confer'd on them—and if the sisters should have faith to heal the sick, let all hold their tongues, and let everything

roll on” (*Nauvoo Relief Society* 1842,36). While it is unclear whether the average Mormon woman was performing healings during this era, it was practiced by leading women and midwives. From his statement, it appears that Joseph Smith did not originate the idea of women giving healing blessings, but he justified it once it was in practice.

Women in Nauvoo were involved in “various negotiations of belief and practice including. . . original invention, unintentional innovation, and intentional adaption” (Primiano 1995, 43). They expanded their ministerial and spiritual authority through the Relief Society which became a critical force in early LDS women’s religious experience (1842-1844). Even when the society was dismantled by Young in 1844—lasting over a decade—the women who had been involved in the society continued to draw from their influence new ways to impact women’s place in Mormonism and extend philanthropic services to those in need.

Other developments in Nauvoo, including the introduction of temple ritual and polygamy, impacted women’s roles and worked in tandem with the development of the Relief Society. Emerging from these practices flowed new, often overlapping, folk groups that provided women with increasing autonomy and paved the way to further religious innovations.

### The Mormon Temple

On January 19, 1841, Joseph Smith dictated a revelation from God commanding the construction of a temple in Nauvoo: “And with iron, with copper, and with brass, and with zinc, and with all your precious things of the earth; and build a house to my name, for the Most High to dwell therein. For there is not a place found on earth that he may come to and restore again that which was lost unto you, or which he hath taken away, even the fullness of the priesthood” (Doctrines and Covenants 124: 27-28). The temple became a center of spiritual instruction that

incorporated a complex series of rituals. While women were not invited to participate in these rituals in the temple in Kirtland, Ohio, Smith expressed his intention to have women be part of the Nauvoo cultus. He stated that he “was going to make of this Society a kingdom of priests an [as] in Enoch’s day— as in Paul’s day” (*Nauvoo Relief Society* 1842, 22).

While the temple was not completed until 1845, Smith began administering the rites of the temple on the top floor of his store in May 1842. Those privileged to receive the sacred rites before the temple was completed were known as the “Holy Order” or “Anointed Quorum.” In September 1843, Smith inducted many of the leading sisters of the Relief Society. Through the rites of temple, men and women were “endowed” with power and extended promises concerning the afterlife.

As the temple reached its completion, church leaders granted broader access, and vernacular performances of temple-like rites seeped into everyday practice among the women of the Relief Society. The ritual washing and anointing performed in the temple was adapted and administered by women in preparation for birth as reflected in the minutes of the Oakley, Idaho, Relief Society dated 1901 that record a washing and anointing ceremony performed on an expectant mother:

We anoint you[r] back, your spinal column that you might be strong and healthy no disease fasten upon it no accident befall [befall] you, Your kidneys that they might be active and healthy and perform their proper functions, your bladder that it might be strong and protected from accident, your Hips that your system might relax and give way for the birth of your child, your sides that you[r] liver, your lungs, and spleen that they might be strong and perform their proper functions . . . your breasts that your milk may

come freely and you need not be afflicted with sore nipples as many are, your heart that it might be comforted. (*Oakley Relief Society* 1901-1910, 112)

Historians Kris Wright and Jonathan Stapley have pointed out that "the practice of washing and anointing for health shares a liturgical homology to the Mormon temple rituals. Though these written patterns do not include language from the temple initiatory ritual, they share a similar overall pattern of administration, which is reflected in other aspects of nineteenth century temple worship" (2011, 8).

Temple discourse also became a regular component of public speech, particularly following the Saints' exodus to Utah Territory. Literary critic Edward Tullidge, in an ethnographic tome on Mormon women, captures the illuminating declaration of one Latter-day Saint sister:

Woman also soon became high priestess and prophetess. She was this *officially*. The constitution of the Church acknowledged her divine mission to administer for the regeneration of the race. The genius of a patriarchal priesthood naturally made her the apostolic help-meet for man. If you saw her not in the pulpit *teaching* the congregation, yet was she to be found in the temple, administering for the living and the dead! Even in the holy of holies she was met. As a high priestess she blessed with the laying on of hands! As a prophetess she oracled in holy places!... She held the keys of the administration of angels and of the working of miracles and of the "sealing" pertaining to "the heavens and the earth." Never before was woman so much as she is in this Mormon dispensation! (1877, 22)

Tullidge recognized the temple's influence on the identity of Mormon women. In the temple women performed sacred rituals such as "baptisms for the dead" that offered salvation to the

non-Mormon deceased and the endowment and sealing that spiritually empowered women in this world and exalted them in the next. Tullidge also refers to motherhood, the controversial practice of blessing, the unique independence of women enjoyed in preaching from the pulpit, even if only in the Relief Society. In short, the expansion of woman's authority was inextricably tied to the rites of the temple and women's performance of that authority was a vernacular outgrowth.

### Polygamy

Polygamy was introduced into the Church slowly and privately over a period of several years. While Smith dictated a revelation regarding the practice in 1843, it was not published until 1852, long after Smith's death and the Saints' arrival in Utah Territory. However, by 1844, the Church's hierarchy and many of the laity were aware of the practice. For example, Smith had taken wives in private and instructed some of his closest associates to do the same (Bushman 2005, 491; Turner 2012, 90-92). Despite Mormons' attempt to secret the practice, accusations from outside of the Church were common and added to already mounting tensions in the region; indeed, some have contended that it was polygamy that eventually led to Smith's assassination (Bushman 2005, 526-550). Even Latter-day Saints were disturbed by the practice's introduction. Emma Smith had a particularly fraught relationship with plural marriage. The 1843 revelation had commanded her to "receive all those that have been given unto my servant Joseph" (Doctrine and Covenants 132:52). Yet she vacillated on whether she would support her husband's plural relationships. While she eventually grudgingly acquiesced to some marriages, she used the Relief Society pulpit to voice outcry with "polygamy, bigamy, fornication, adultery, and prostitution" (Phelps 1844, 3). Emma's public objections caused Brigham Young to oppose the continuation of the society in 1844, and he did not allow its revival until 1855 (Turner 2012,

158). However, the early 1840s had already seen the establishment of a new and growing folk group consisting of women in polygamous unions and leading women in the Relief Society organization who were wed to members of the hierarchy. Their relationships would foster support for the sisters' evolving interests and practices.

Migration to the West distanced the Saints from persecutions in Illinois and Iowa Territory. In the Great Basin, the Saints could openly practice their religion and establish their own government unmolested by un-approving neighbors, at least for a time. Polygamy became a major tenant of the fledgling Church, expanding the circle of practicing sisters. While the new marital system presented its challenges, it also allowed for the greater degree of autonomy experienced by sisters in the early Church. With multiple women carrying the responsibilities of wife and/or mother in a home, women were freer to pursue other interests. For example, numerous women entered the medical field, either attending university or receiving training under a fellow Latter-day Saint sister who had attended university (see: Simpson 2016).

By the mid-1850s, the United States government began placing pressure on Utah Territory to abandon polygamy, fueling confrontations and leading to the Utah War (1857–58). Later, the government enacted a series of legislation banning plural marriage, including the Morrill Anti-Bigamy Act (1862), the Edmunds Act (1882), and the Edmund-Tucker Act (1887). The federal government enforced fines and imprisonment, which led to challenging times for the Mormons. Polygamous Mormons were also banned from formal participation in national politics. However, just as the government was tightening its restraints on Mormon men, Mormon women began to gain traction in the political sphere. Perceived by the general public as victims of polygamy, these women were given voice and several publicly lobbied against anti-polygamous legislation (Neilson 2011, 76-79).

Surprisingly, polygamy extended women an opportunity to exercise their agency in the public eye. In doing so, the women's understanding of their role in the Church would have almost certainly been affected in the process. Their contribution was no longer confined solely to the home (or to their husbands, as the public presumed) but expanded to the public sphere. In response to the public's query of who Mormon women were and what authority they had within the Church, the very women in question were providing the answers.

Although there was some disagreement within the broader female Mormon community, several leading sisters became avid supporters of the women's suffrage movement. Between 1872 and 1914, a Mormon women's newspaper called *The Woman's Exponent* devoted its pages specifically to women's concerns. The periodical included a composite of agendas—feminist, domestic, educational, social, and religious—communicated through informative articles, fiction, religious testimony, and poetry. The journal attempted to dispel popular views of Mormon women by replacing them with images of strong, educated, or at least intelligent, women wielding personal agency. In the July 15, 1872, issue, an article entitled “Woman's Voice” stated, “We ‘Mormon Women’ ought to write and tell the world—whether it is pleased to believe us or not—that we are not the poor, oppressed beings we are represented to be, I have lived in the great world, you know; I have lived here thirteen years, and I realize that I have not been oppressed here; but have been free to come, free to go, free to work or let it alone. I was not as free in England, nor in the States. I would not go to live in either place, or anywhere else in preference to this free, wild, mountainous country, with all its deficiencies” (*Woman's Voice* 1872, 30). The remarks of the closing editorial in the issue voiced a similar sentiment:

Who are so well able to speak for the women of Utah as the women of Utah themselves?

‘It is better to represent ourselves than to be misrepresented by others!’ For these reasons,



and that women may help each other by the diffusion of knowledge and information possessed by many and suitable to all, the publication of WOMAN'S EXPONENT, a journal owned by, controlled by and edited by Utah ladies, has been commenced.

The editorial announced that Eliza R. Snow approved of the journal and would be contributing "as she has leisure from her numerous duties." The official support of the paper seems to signify the women's desire to shape the sisters' worldview as well as that of their non-Mormon contemporaries by giving them permission to align with what could have been viewed as a radical agenda (*Woman's Voice* 1872, 32). The male Church hierarchy supported the *Woman's Exponent* as well, which meant that the paper was met with little resistance. This was an advantageous agreement for both parties; the men received their wives' public support, even advocacy, of polygamy and the women achieved greater status.

#### Mormon Folk Medicine And Healthcare In Nineteenth-Century America

The prominent place of midwifery in mid-nineteenth-century Mormonism emerged from the Nauvoo era and its inclusion of women in the Relief Society, temple ritual, and plural marriage. This section examines how Mormon midwifery, as it was sanctioned by the hierarchy of the Church—first by Joseph Smith and later by Brigham Young—became an official position in the Church where women possessed a unique authority, not solely professional, but also spiritual in nature. It is in the pseudo-ecclesiastical position of the midwife that we see unique developments in Mormon women's culture and practices, particularly as they involved birth and motherhood. Moving forward, it is important to recognize how the associations and practices discussed earlier in this chapter provided midwives with greater autonomy to develop their unique authority and maintained the support of Church leaders.

One other influence that is inextricably tied to the traction Mormon midwives gained in the public eye relates to beliefs held by Church authorities regarding healthcare. In nineteenth-century America, doctors were far from reputable practitioners, often raising, not minimizing, the death toll. According to Dr. Steven Dinger, regular doctors of the era were poorly trained, receiving eight months of academic training with very little or no practical experience (2016, 55). The risk of “heroic medicine,” as it was referred to in the twentieth century, was radically higher than that of its competitor, Thomsonian medicine (2016, 55). While Thomsonian doctors were required only to study founder Samuel Thomson’s *New Guide to Health; or Botanic Family Physicians* (1822) to receive certification, their practices were a great deal less hazardous to patients seeking medical treatment. Heroic doctors relied on invasive methods such as bloodletting, purgatives, and the administration of toxic medications, including arsenic and laudanum, as well as unfounded methods of surgery. Thomsonian doctors, on the other hand, relied on non-aggressive approaches—botanical treatments such as the use of cayenne, laxatives, and various roots or herbs (Wilcox 1979, 27).

While both methods were present in the Nauvoo region, early Church leaders strongly encouraged the use of spiritual administration and herbal remedies over medical intervention. A revelation dictated by Smith in 1831 commanded, “And whosoever among you are sick, and have not faith to be healed, but believe, shall be nourished with all tenderness, with herbs and mild food, and that not by the hand of thy enemy. And the elders of the Church, two or more, shall be called, and shall pray for and lay their hands upon them in my name. . . .And again, it shall come to pass that he that hath faith in me to be healed, and is not appointed unto death, shall be healed” (Doctrine and Covenants 42:43–44,48). Young followed Smith’s directive, counseling the Saints in an 1852 epistle, “When you are sick, call for the Elders, who will pray for you, anointing with

oil and the laying on of hands; and nurse each other with herbs, and mild food, and if you do these things, in faith, and quit taking poisons, and poisonous medicines, which God never ordained for the use of men, you shall be blessed” (*Seventh General Epistle*, 324). Reliance on priesthood anointing, which referred to anointing the afflicted person with oil and pronouncing a blessing of healing through the laying on of hands, as well as botanical remedies, was clearly equated with reliance on God—his power and his creation, respectively.

Heroic doctors expanded their practices to include obstetrics. Thomsonian doctors, on the other hand, left the practice as the purview solely of midwifery. Historian William G. Rothstein noted:

Thomson was particularly concerned with midwifery and devoted much attention to it. He argued that a great change had occurred in the practice of midwifery. ‘Thirty years ago the practice of midwifery was principally in the hands of experienced women, who had no difficulty [but the doctors] have now got most of the practice into their own hands. . . . [These] young, inexperienced doctors . . . have little knowledge, except what they get from books, and their practice is to try experiments,’ so that the death of mother or child is the not infrequent result. In addition, they use forceps with such force that ‘they often not only crush the head of the child, but also the neck of the bladder.’ Thomson was probably correct in this, in as much as most physicians began practice without ever having seen an obstetrical delivery. Thomson's own recommendations were full of common sense and sound advice (1972, 133).

The Mormon support of midwives was likely influenced by members’ almost universal disdain for obstetrics and other medical practices they perceived as invasive.

A discourse given by Brigham Young on December 10, 1851, reveals Young's severe position

on obstetrics, particularly in relation to childbirth:

I wish to impart intelligence to the people. My first proposition is the science of medicine. The study and practice of medicine as a science, if it may be called a science, is the most imperfect of any science in existence, as is practiced by the doctors of the present day. The doctors and priests of the day send more to death and hell than anywhere else. . . The practice of doctors in visiting women in childbirth is damnable. Women should be let alone and let nature have its perfect work. Let a woman keep her child if she can 2 or 3 years, but she cannot do it. When the time has come, nature will deliver her of her child without a doctor. Don't fret. Let everything take its proper course and sickness would depart away. . . You are natural persons and God has made you natural. If you are with child, that child will come forth by nature without a doctor. The earth is just so. Will bring forth of itself seed after its kind. If a person is sick and have not faith to be healed, give them herbs, the product of the earth, and it will cure you until it is time to die. . . Who made the doctors? The devil. The Lord did not make the doctors of the present day. Such a thing as a man midwife was not known until about 1500. Why did not the women all die before this time? Look at the Indians. For 100 years, millions of children have been born in the wilderness of male and female and they live and not die without a doctor. . . You may ask what shall we do? I will tell you. I will give you a lesson and I want you to mark it. When you go to visit a woman in travail, let her alone until her full time has come. Remember it. Let the mother alone. Let your system be natural. Teach them also to exercise all that they can that when they come to be delivered, it will be better for them. A doctor if he had good sense would not wish to visit women in childbirth. And if a woman had good sense, she would not wish a man to doctor them on

such an occasion (Van Wagner 2009, 63).

A year later, in 1852, Utah crafted legislation prohibiting doctors' administration of toxic substances without first explaining their purpose and use to patients, family, and friends. Such regulations limited heroic doctors, while botanical treatments never came into question (Hildreth and Moran 1998, 26). This meant that midwives had little competition during the earliest years of the Utah period. The Salt Lake City Council of Health (1849), which was headed by Thomsonian doctors, and, for the most part, Church officials, also had a significant impact on the status of women practicing medicine, including midwives. Not only did the Council of Health eventually include women, but also as changes in medicine arose, the council encouraged women to pursue formal training, including attending university, as will be discussed in the next section.

### Mormon Midwives

In nineteenth-century North America, women were already healers within their own domestic spaces. Because medical professionals provided little safety or comfort, the afflicted sought women's folk remedies and local healing customs (Brady 2000, 84-85). Historian Susanna Morrill referred to this as an expected form of "social 'mothering'" in the Church attending to birth, death, and sickness intersected with other domestic responsibilities (2010, 129). Midwives were often seen as nurturers, characterized by innate womanly attributes that suited them to the task. An article in the *Relief Society Magazine* honoring Mormonism's midwives highlights this: "Their skill, their resourcefulness, their tact, their tender touch, all these things, together with their natural cleanliness of mind and body, fit them to assist the mother and to cleanse and prepare the child for its entrance into the word" (*Ye Ancient and*

*Honorable Order*, 345). Since ancient times, women almost entirely dominated the profession of midwifery because of their socio-cultural role as mothers which for Mormons was also a sacred position, performed by even God, herself.

The origins of midwifery as a distinctly religious (i.e., Mormon) expression can be traced back to the earliest period of the Nauvoo era (1839-1846). Jane Johnston Black, Anne Green Duston Carling, Vienna Jaques, Harriet Matilda Daniel Johnson, and Patty Bartlett Sessions are the earliest known ordained midwives in the Church (Stevens 2016, 67). Under Smith and his successors, these women were “called” and ceremonially “set apart” by the laying on of hands in the same way other Church positions were received. Through this setting apart, the midwives were granted religious legitimacy, as well as a unique spoken “blessing” to aid them in their assignment. In Carling’s blessing, Smith indicated that she would be successful if she used only herbs in her treatments (Carter 1948, 137). While her use of herbal remedies garnered trust within Mormon circles, as discussed previously, it was Smith’s call, which was emphatically equated with God’s will, that earned Carling and other midwives their status. Over the next several decades, Church leaders designated hundreds of women to be midwives.

In the historical record, blessings like the one given to Carling are sparse. However, those that do remain reflect the belief that these women were endowed with the power to heal and bring forth life. I have found that the blessings also echo popular Mormon discourse regarding women, women’s bodies, and birth. Lucy P. Russell, who was set apart by Apostle Joseph F. Smith in 1881, was instructed that she would “administer in the name of the Lord” and was not to “forget the important calling she has chosen namely to assist in the midst of thy people of bringing forth children and thus fulfilling the commandments to multiply and replenish the earth” (Smith 1881). Russell’s blessing highlights not only God’s command to Adam and Eve

but also women's responsibility to mediate liminality and manage the transition of spirits from the premortal world into mortality (Morris 2010, 130). Latter-day Saints saw this responsibility, like gender, as an extension of that which was both divine and eternal.

A similar view is expressed in an editorial that was first published in 1857 in *The Mormon* and again forty years later in the *Young Women's Journal*. It quotes Apostle (1838–80) and President (1880–87) John Taylor who described women descending from the heavens, from the care of their heavenly father and mother into mortality. In the editorial, Taylor urges the women of the Church to realize their “origin, object and ultimate destiny” to become “priestesses and queens upon thy Heavenly Father's throne, and a glory to thy husband and offspring, to bear the souls of men.” They would eventually become as the Mother in heaven and “to people other worlds while eternity goes and eternity comes” (Taylor 1897). Giving birth was not simply a temporal responsibility but the work of heaven.

In 1887, President Taylor set Elizabeth Roundy apart as a midwife. In the blessing, he referred to her as a “savior to the living” and urged her to “give life not to destroy it, to preserve not to do away.” He granted her power against “sickness, disease, and affliction” (Taylor 1887). The term “savior to the living” is not mentioned in Mormon scripture, but it is reminiscent of the term “Savior on Mount Zion” in Obadiah, a term which Joseph Smith connected to those who performed vicarious rituals on behalf of the dead. In an 1844 sermon regarding the completion of the Nauvoo Temple, Smith stated:

But how are they to become Saviors on Mount Zion? By building their temple, erecting their baptismal fonts, and going forth, and receiving all the ordinances, baptisms, confirmations, washings, anointings, ordinations and sealing powers upon their heads, in behalf of all their progenitors who are dead, and redeem them, that they may come forth

in the first resurrection and be exalted to thrones of glory with them, and herein is the chain that binds the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the children to the fathers . . . (Woodruff, 341).

Birth, like death, was a necessary ritual within Mormon cosmology—a gateway through which spirits become mortal souls. Taylor's blessing, then, placed Roundy at the gate, assisting mother and ushering child into its mortal existence.

The official endorsement of apostle and prophet more than likely impacted the level of spiritual authority midwives wielded within the Church, but it was the nature of the midwife's work that yielded praise from the community. An editorial in the March 1, 1888, issue of the *Woman's Exponent* reads, "They [midwives] have taken great pains to prepare themselves in their profession for a life work, and certainly they seem well adapted to the calling they have chosen. It is a noble and grand one, and every woman who devotes her time and talents to the healing of the sick and the afflicted wins for herself a tender place in the community where she resides" (*Editorial Notes* 1888, 148). Lionizing refrains were not uncommon. Nascent societies in nineteenth century America recognized the essential service midwives performed.

While birth was a jubilant occasion for Mormons—it signified the fulfillment of God's commandment to bring spirits to earth as well as the growth of one's spiritual kingdom—it was complicated by difficult living conditions and inadequate medical knowledge of the late nineteenth century. Maternal and infant mortality rates were high, and families had to face the looming possibility of loss. While many midwives recorded nearly legendary success rates—Patty Sessions documented two complicated births out of 3,977, and Sarah Young Vance reported no deaths in the delivery of 1,500 babies—the reality for women on the American frontier was that birth and death were often acquainted (Arrington 1997, 48). As a result, the



midwife's occupation required spiritual and emotional support as well as physical care.

Spiritual innovations that were incorporated into the midwife's repertoire, such as the washing and anointing of an expectant mother, may have developed as a means of combatting death and/or assuaging the fears of the mother. James Farmer recorded in his journal that his wife fell ill following the birth of their child. When he expressed concern to the midwife and accompanying Relief Society sisters, they reassured Farmer in word and then proceeded to bless the body of his wife. He recalled that they "washed from the crown of her head to feet and the Sisters anointed her with oil from the Crown of head to the soles of her feet and laid hands upon her and blessed her by the authority of the Holy Priesthood invested in them for they had received their washing and anointing after all this was over and she was dressed in clean linen she was laid on her bed and she appeared quite cheerful" (Farmer 1855, 414-415).

While Mormonism was a patriarchal institution, in birth women asserted a matriarchal authority. Like Farmer's acknowledgement of the women's "priesthood," others described midwives as presiding "as high priestesses in the chamber of birth." (*Ye Ancient and Honorable Order*, 345). Mothers performed saving ordinances for mother and child, midwives blessed, anointed, and guided the process, and friends and family assisted. In a sphere in which men seldom attended, women found voice and power. Women were made holy through the sacred work they performed.

Birth also provided an opportunity for women to create meaningful and lasting ties. Over the years, many prominent midwives became known as mother or grandmother (e.g., "Grandma" Janet Hardie and "Mother" Patty Bartlett Sessions) (*Ye Ancient and Honorable Order*, 347-350). Emma R. Jacobs recalled that midwife Zina D. Young was the only woman she ever called mother after her biological mother died in Emma's infancy (Bradley and Woodward 2000, 232).

Others affectionately referred to her as “Aunt” Zina. Community was at the center of women’s spiritual practice. It also played a major role in how the Saints viewed the sanctity of womanhood and childbirth.

There was a fluidity between laity and leadership in the expansion of women’s authority. As Wright and Stapley have suggested, all Mormon ritual operated “in two partially overlapping liturgical modalities: one folk and the other formal.” Dynamism within early Mormon liturgy was rooted in oral transmission blurring the demarcation between official and folk. Mormons “learned ritual performance from the example and mentoring” of others, rather than by precise written formulations (Wright and Stapley 2011, 3). This greatly bolstered women’s authority in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, as the twentieth century progressed, the Church worked to reform liturgical practices, particularly through the distribution of print media, which greatly abridged women’s rich religious vernacular.

Midwifery came under fire when medical and technological advancements threatened its authority. In 1847, the same year the Saints arrived in Utah Territory, the American Medical Association, which sought to improve the standards of and establish uniformity in medical training and education, was founded (Divett 1963, 35). Mormons’ preference for Thomsonian medicine persisted longer than that of their contemporaries, but eventually it began to lose steam as well. The turn from botanical medicine—which relied on a rich tradition of folk remedies and practices, intuition, and colloquial training—to formal medicine was problematic for the future of midwifery. Formal education was generally less accessible to women, and men had already begun encroaching on the field. For women, this meant the loss of both a profession and power. As religious studies scholar Pamela Klassen has argued, “The rise of hospital birth . . . contributed to the decline of religious authority—whether that of a tradition or an individual

faith—in matters of childbirth” (2001, 25). Once such authority was retracted, vernacular theologies surrounding childbirth and midwifery began to dissipate, at least, in official settings.

That said, in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, women still made strides in the medical profession. In 1873, Brigham Young announced to the Church that “the time had come for women to come forth as doctors in these valleys of the mountains” (Noal 1974, 104-105). Eliza R. Snow also declared, “We want sister physicians that can officiate in any capacity that the gentlemen are called upon to officiate and unless they educate themselves the gentlemen that are flocking in our midst will do it” (*Salt Lake Stake Retrenchment*). In September, apostles Orson Pratt and George Q. Cannon ceremonially set apart twelve midwives (List of Women Set Apart 1873-1888). The following month, apostles Wilford Woodruff and Orson Pratt recorded “a meeting held in the Historians Office for the purpose of blessing and setting apart midwives and nurses to operate in Israel.” Twenty-four women were in attendance (*Salt Lake Stake Retrenchment*).

Romanian Pratt and Ellis Shipp were among the first to respond to Young’s call and receive formal training. Pratt traveled east to the Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia in 1874, and Shipp arrived the following year (Simpson 2016, 22). Both were extremely influential. Shipp faced a number of trials during her schooling: the hardship of leaving her four young children in the care of sister wives, pregnancy, and matters of financial distress. However, in completing her education, Shipp became one of the foremost doctors in Utah, opening the School of Obstetrics and Nursing in 1878 and training more than five hundred graduates (Simpson 2016, 29). In 1899, the Salt Lake Stake saw the organization of the Relief Society Nursing School, which provided medical care to church members living in impoverished or rural communities. Midwives and nurses were called to settle in these remote locations.

Historian Patricia D'Antonio explained that “for these women, the value of nursing’s care work was not solely measured in terms of ideas, identities, or the possibilities of the wage labor market. It was also measured by its meaning. Nursing represented a way that Mormon women might remain active and empowered participants in constructing meaningful lives, in supporting their families’ domestic economy, and in participating in their communities’ social world” (2010, 84). Mormon women’s transition into the medical field highlights the immense impact that midwifery had on the status of women. In an era where women were rarely working outside of the home, LDS women were pursuing formal education and entering the medical field.

However, the rise of the twentieth century brought changes for the Latter-day Saint church. The end of polygamy in 1890 led to a renewed emphasis on women’s domestic responsibilities and a growing stigmatization of women working outside of the home. In 1908, the Church presidency founded the “priesthood reform movement,” an effort that aimed to standardize Mormon liturgical practices and streamline Church curriculum. While the Relief Society continued to play a major role in Utah’s medical care, women’s autonomy and vernacular practices came under the scrutiny of Church leaders, leading to the end of women’s performance of ritual blessings and an era of great spiritual autonomy. Later, as the American government developed forms of welfare assistance and more stringent healthcare reform, the Relief Society became less directly involved in medical care and no longer sanctioned official midwifery and nursing.

As this brief overview of the development of women’s vernacular practices in the early Church suggests, women’s religious authority expanded through innovations of the prophet Joseph Smith and of grassroots feminine networking. Beginning in the Nauvoo period and persisting into the early part of the twentieth century, midwives were called and set apart by

prophets and apostles. Midwifery flourished into a respected profession wherein women wielded religious authority. While these stories have little visibility in the official history of the Church, to some present day Latter-day Saint women—birth workers and mothers—these narratives represent a sacred past that gives meaning to their lives and chosen professions. The narratives of modern Mormon birth workers are the subject of the next chapter; many participants pointed to this golden era of Mormonism and Mormon women's power as significant in the formation of their own religious identities and beliefs.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### MINING THE PAST: NARRATIVES OF MORMON BIRTH WORKERS AND THEIR QUEST FOR IDENTITY

In his introduction to *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal writes: “The past is everywhere. All around us lie features with more or less familiar antecedents. Relics, histories, memories suffuse human experience. Most past traces ultimately perish, and all that remain are altered. But they are collectively enduring” (2015, 1). The past is essential to our imagination. How we construct our own identities is inextricably related to our histories, not solely those confined to our personal experiences, but also histories of the people and events that preceded our lives. Because of the intrinsic value the past offers individual and institutional quests to construct identity, it is always contested.

In this chapter, I examine how contemporary Latter-day Saint women—specifically the alternative birth workers and mothers in my case study—draw on their collective past. While official discourse has had a moderate impact on their historical interpretations, my contributors constructed their identities in relationship to the Mormon past mainly based on their understandings derived from academic studies, activist literature, blogs, family stories, and discussions with other women. In this chapter, I argue that by constructing a legacy that extends back to nineteenth-century Mormon midwifery, modern LDS birth workers establish legitimacy regarding a marginalized practice and voice subversive perspectives on LDS views of womanhood.

Sources of Women’s Heritage and History

The construction of Mormon theology has been largely a creative, rather than philosophical, undertaking. While most Christian theologians of his day debated by arguing over scriptural interpretations, Joseph Smith told stories (Flake 2007). The accounts of his personal encounters with the sacred became the foundation of Mormon theology (See Givens 2005). For example, one of the Saints' most significant narratives is Smith's theophany; it is the story of a fourteen-year-old boy who, while in search of true religion, knelt in prayer and was enraptured by a vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ. The account serves as the beginning of Smith's prophetic ministry and, as chronologized in the history of the church, Mormonism's beginning. Not only would this story become a model for the conversion of millions, who would also be asked to seek and promised that God would reveal, but it also provided the theological foundation for Mormonism's insistence that God was a personal being. This was not the only narrative of Smith's life that would shape the fledgling faith. There were others, including multiple angelic visitations, revelations, and the discovery and translation of an ancient record (today known as the Book of Mormon).

The lives of Smith's prophetic successors (1844 to present) were also documented. Stories from their youth to the time of their presidential ministries in the church have been organized, published and distributed for use as Sunday curriculum. The foundations of Mormon theology have been shaped by the stories of these men. While there are significant Mormon narratives that do not directly involve the church's leaders (e.g. the pioneer trek to the Great Basin), the words and stories of prophets are uniquely authoritative. In a similar vein, Latter-day Saints regularly share stories about the apostles of both the early and contemporary church. Nineteenth century apostles are positioned in the heart of modern scripture (in the Doctrine and Covenants), and more recent apostles are remembered in church publications.

That is not to say that the stories of lay men and women are insignificant. In fact, on the first Sunday of each month, story becomes a form of worship as Latter-day Saints gather for “testimony meeting” and share their witness of Christ’s gospel, more often than not through personal experience narratives. It is not surprising, then, that story is key to my contributors’ theological understandings. As Eric Eliason and Tom Mould have noted, “most religious adherents can be defined primarily by their theology. Mormons, it might be argued, are defined primarily by their history” (2013, 279).

And yet, the institutional narrative of Mormonism has, by and large, privileged the voices and actions of men, obscuring the contributions and experiences of women who represent half of its adherents. Yet, women have been far from passive participants in the development of the faith. As noted in the last chapter, early Latter-day Saint women were activists, spiritual leaders, and respected medicine women. They also raised families, carried communities when men left to serve missions, and played a profound role in advocating politically and publicly for the Church's acceptance in the United States and abroad (Ulrich 2015). However, until recently LDS women's history has not been fully incorporated into Church manuals. When LDS members narrate women's stories over the pulpit or in Sunday school classrooms, they usually pluck narratives from personal family histories or depend on what Eliason and Mould have referred to as the "sacred history[ies] of near-mythic proportion"—the stories of the select few heroines of "Mormonism's heroic age" (2013, 287).

In recent years, the LDS Church has begun to fill this void in its history. In 2016, the LDS Church’s official historical press published *The First Fifty Years of Relief Society: Key Documents in Latter-day Saint Women’s History*, a massive 767 page tome focused on both well-known Mormon women and those who were lesser known. The book documents the



development of the Relief Society and in doing so captures the experiences of everyday LDS women. In 2017, *At the Pulpit: 185 Years of Discourses by Latter-day Saint Women* provided further resources for the history of LDS women.

Both of these volumes followed the Church's first substantial effort at a narrative women's history, the 2011 *Daughters in My Kingdom: The History and Works of Relief Society*. *Daughters* covered key moments and significant heroines from two centuries of Mormon women's history. The project was developed under the direction of the General Relief Society's president and was widely praised for its telling of women's heritage. The 242 page full-color volume was distributed free of cost to LDS women worldwide. However, its incorporation into the Relief Society's Sunday curriculum has been limited, left to the discretion of local leadership. In 2016, Julie Beck spoke of the approaching five-year anniversary of the book's publication:

Many women and men inside and outside the Church adopted notions that the most interesting stories in Church history were about men, that women were second class citizens in the Church, that Latter day Saint women were generally sweet but largely uninformed, and that Relief Society itself was in its waning season, having no real function or standing in modern times beyond a Sunday classroom experience. . . . As the Church had grown to span the globe, there seemed to be confusion about who Latter-day Saint women were and what Relief Society was about. Like other general Relief Society leaders before us, we realized that our identity and purpose was not being communicated effectively across a diversity of languages, cultures, economies, and experiences found in the Church. (Beck 2016)

*Daughters*, Beck explained, developed in response to this sense of neglect and the general misunderstanding of Mormon women and their contributions. Mormon women had too few

models to look to as exemplars of the faith. Men's contributions drastically overshadowed those of LDS women. Following the trend in American history more generally, the domestic sphere in which women commonly contributed to society was seen as peripheral to that of the public sphere where men appear and, in patriarchal institutions, lead. As will emerge in this chapter the revised, more inclusive, historical narrative has had positive implications for some LDS women.

The LDS Church is not the only source to offer a historical interpretation of Mormon women's history. Lay historians and scholars have made major contributions to understanding the LDS past. Mormon women scholars have been especially influential in expanding the historical narrative on Mormon women. Blogs and periodicals have offered not only insight into Mormon women's past but also a voice to modern women. In 2006, Jan Shipps observed in her *Sojourner in the Promise Land: Forty Years Among the Mormons*:

An outpouring of Mormon women's history can be seen in books and Mormon periodicals that have no official connection to the church—most especially *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*, *Sunstone*, *Exponent II*, and the *Journal of Mormon History*, all of which have, or recently have had, women as editors. Access to this plethora of historical information is creating an LDS women's intellectual community, most of whose members are stalwart but increasingly independent Saints. (199)

This continues to be the case more than a decade later.

Modern feminism has stirred some Mormon women to produce their own representations of the otherwise forgotten past. Advocacy groups have added to Mormonism's collective imagination. For instance, in 2013, Kate Kelly, a human rights lawyer, founded the group Ordain Women, which drew heavily on nineteenth-century Mormon women's history to promote women's ordination. One pamphlet published by Ordain Women entitled *Know the History*

includes quotes from early Mormon women's leaders alongside quotes from contemporary feminist writers ("Know the History," 2013). Another publication by independent Mormon feminists, *Mormon Feminism: Essential Writings*, has attempted to document the recent history of Mormon feminism. This edited volume presents the movement from the 1970s to present day through the voices and publications of the feminists that have propelled the movement over the past four decades. This publication offers a balanced representation of the movement's diversity and generational shifts.

The Daughters of Utah Pioneers Museum in Salt Lake City has been a notable resource for Mormon women's pioneer history since 1901. They published a number of volumes that focus on Mormon women in short biographical snapshots. *Pioneer Women of Faith and Fortitude* (1998) was a major undertaking that encompasses approximately forty-six hundred photographs and eight thousand brief life sketches of LDS pioneer women in a four-volume set. A 2016 museum exhibit on Mormon midwifery showcased nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century medical instruments, photographs, and stories. Upon viewing the exhibit, one midwife reflected on social media that she had been deeply moved by the imagination of the wise and tender hands of early LDS midwives hard at work.

"Cultural memory," defined by Egyptologist Jan Assman, is the storehouse from which a people derive their "peculiarity and unity" and the institutional imagination of a people's heritage (1995, 129), is a useful theoretical frame for exploring how contemporary LDS midwives have utilized these women-centric Mormon pasts. Assman writes:

Cultural memory is characterized by its distance from the everyday. Distance from the everyday (transcendence) marks its temporal horizon. Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful

events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communications (recitation, practice, observance). . . . In cultural memory, such islands of time expand into memory spaces of ‘retrospective contemplativeness. (1995, 129)

While cultural memory has often been explored as an institutional phenomenon, folk groups, small and large, also remember collectively. Many of my contributors had an acute awareness of being part of a larger legacy of Mormon women and described birth (both in labor and in assistance) as providing a portal to the past and opportunities to connect with both literal and figurative genealogies. Birth, as a rite of womanhood, offers a uniquely feminist link to the past that has been largely overlooked in institutional histories.

Historically, women have used narrative as tool to bring about social and political change. As Jeanette Rodriguez and Ted Fortier describe in their book, *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith and Identity*:

One means by which memory is transmitted is through narrative. Narrative emphasizes the active, self-shaping quality of human thought. Its powers reside in its ability to create, form, refashion, and reclaim identity. . . . Both as individuals and as members of various groups, our present existence is powerfully shaped by our recollections of the past and anticipations of the future. (2007, 7) The stories of contemporary LDS midwives, then, revive a significant tradition that not only influenced the early Church but also continues to influence modern women.

Before turning to these stories, I would like to emphasize one final institution whose historical consciousness impacts the identity of my contributors: the family. The immediate family is an obvious influence that shapes self-perception because it represents a major social

force in day-to-day life. However, families are also conduits to the past. They are storytellers who transmit folklore.

Church leaders and even Mormon scriptures encourage members to take an interest in one's own family past and genealogy. Indeed, family history research is rooted in both religious obligation and familial devotion. For example, the rites of the temple are administered to the living, but they are also extended to the dead through vicarious performances. It is not uncommon for Mormons to profess developing an emotional connection with their ancestors after passing through these rites on their behalf. As Apostle Dallin H. Oaks explains, genealogy is “the process by which we identify our place in our eternal family” of the dead and living (2017). Through genealogical research individual members of the church expand their personal narratives; through performing vicarious ordinances in the temple, they expand their ancestors' stories.

Unofficial histories—the stories that families pass from one generation to the next—have always played a significant role in individual and familial identity. Historian Mark P. Leone has argued that Mormon history has been democratized as Saints narrate their past:

Mormon history is clearly in the hands of the people. And the people change the pattern of the past; they are continually rewriting history, individually and at will. Of this they are unaware, as they are unaware that they change their perception of the past depending on what is called for in the present (1979, 200).

Institutional narratives crafted under the direction of Church officials have less of an impact than the stories shared in the homes of Mormon families that regularly recall and recite the sojourn of the family's ancestors into the faith. As cultural geographer Catherine Nash argues:

Genealogy is a practice which joins imaginative self-making and guarantees of truth about individual identity. . . . Genealogy promises a neat and satisfying pre-given and predetermined collective identity such as 'Irishness' guaranteed by descent. At the same time, however, it offers the potential pleasures of choosing an 'authentic' identity.

(Walters 1990) . . . Historically it has been bound up with lineage and pedigree, property and inheritance (Lowenthal 1998), but its popular forms are also closely linked to family history and the recovery of 'hidden histories of women, of working-class people, and others who are marginalized in mainstream and official histories. (2002, 29)

Set within the context of LDS women's history—both institutional and familial—are the stories of contemporary Mormon women. Here I examine narratives shared by three participants: Kayte Brown, Jenne Alderks, and Elizabeth Smith. Each shared stories about how her career has been shaped by the legacy—and in at least one case, the supernatural presence—of past midwives.

### The Internet and The Transmission of Home Birth Narratives

Before we turn to my contributor's narratives I would like to briefly address the role that the internet has played in the transmission of Mormon home birth stories; because despite the rich history of Mormon midwives, Latter-day Saint women rarely share stories of midwife-assisted births from the pulpit. Instead, they confine these narratives to intimate circles of friends and family. There are multiple reasons for this including the fact that, as noted earlier, alternative birthers and care professionals make up only a small portion of the Mormon population. Those who embrace midwifery may fear criticism from those who have chosen mainstream methods of birth. They may feel uncomfortable trying to explain their ideas of birth to those who do not share them. As well, I suspect that some feel these stories are out of place in official Church

settings due to their feminist lens which emerges from the women-centric experience of midwife-assisted birth. As a result, many women have turned to the internet to establish community.

Years before the advent of the web, Alan Dundes observed that new technology of any form is “a vital factor in the transmission in folklore” (1980, 17). This has perhaps never been truer than with the internet, and increasingly, folklorists have come to recognize its potential in transforming the study of folklore (see: Trevor J. Blank 2009; Robert Glenn Howard 2008). The internet helped to shape this thesis; it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to complete this study without the internet that allowed me to develop otherwise unlikely connections.

During my research, I spent countless hours online, sometimes interacting with but mostly observing other women. Internet communities dedicated to either LDS holistic living or LDS birth professionals were particularly useful for understanding where and how Mormons transmit information. Social media groups offer members a safe space to engage in meaningful dialogue with like-minded individuals without the fear of social repercussions or misunderstandings. These groups provide women, who share a distinct worldview shaped by birth and belief, with a community to belong to. For example, one group described their purpose as providing:

a safe place for members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon) faith who are like minded in body-mind-spirit wholeness to gather & lift each other up in Truth & Light. The focus of this group is to learn & grow in our knowledge of all things Abundance, Prosperity, & Health from a holistic perspective. This can include finances, business & personal development, family, freedom/liberty, holistic (natural)

health/healing, homeschooling, & gospel discussions. (LDS Abundance and Holistic Living)

Another group defined their purpose as providing a space for Latter-day Saint birth workers to “fellowship” and discuss their “unique” experiences (Latter-day Saint Birth Professionals of the World).

While certainly the internet is not the only space for transmitting beliefs related to alternative birth, it does allow women to exchange ideas in a relatively free environment. In these forums, women author and consume first-person accounts that express their perceptions of the world. Dialogues can emerge that affect and broaden contributors’ perceptions. In this way, the internet can be a powerful shaping agent.

The internet plays a fundamental role in the transmission of my contributors’ beliefs but also in the formation of their identities. For example, one contributor, Kayte, shares her story on *Exponent*, an online women’s blog associated with *Exponent II* magazine. Their purpose is described as the following:

The purpose of *Exponent II* is to provide a forum for Mormon women to share their life experiences in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance. This exchange allows us to better understand each other and shape the direction of our lives. Our common bond is our connection to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and our commitment to women. We publish this paper as a living history in celebration of the strength and diversity of women.

This blog has often been associated with a Mormon feminist perspective, offering a safe space for discussing issues regarding women’s choice and female empowerment, both underlying themes of alternative birth.



Kayte

I first encountered Kayte Brown's story on the *Exponent*. Her contribution was entitled "My Work/My Glory, or the Work of a Midwife." It was a part of the "Birth/Rebirth" series, a forum that ran in January 2014 and included over a dozen personal birth narratives of Mormon women. The series included hospital, home, and unassisted birth, adoption, miscarriage, surrogacy, and even metaphorical birth and rebirth narratives. Kayte offered a unique perspective as an unmarried student midwife.

Her post began:

My name is Kayte. I live in Salt Lake City, Utah and I am a student midwife. . . . I began my path to midwifery first under the inspiration of my great-great-great grandmother, Sarah Indiaetta Young, and her stories of being a midwife on the Arizona Frontier.

Second, because my mother taught me to love birth and all that it encompasses.

As someone who has not given birth herself, Kayte described what she saw and felt during her training. She spoke of the raw emotion in the gestures and in the bodies of mother and baby:

People consider birth, especially home birth, and choose to only see the risks and every possible danger, and it overwhelms them; it makes them scared. They fear birth, but they do not see it as I see it. They do not see it as my mommas see it. They do not see it as the empowering, sacred experience that it is. . . . I wish I could give people that feeling, that moment—the uncapturable moment—when a babe emerges and momma takes hold of her for the first time. Oh! that moment is so, so GOLD. It is the moment a woman becomes a mother, and whether for the first or sixth or tenth time, it is a moment to be honored. . . . Having never had a child myself, I cannot tell you what it means firsthand to

be that momma, or to be the recipient of those feelings (the feelings between a new mom and her babe), but as an observer of the moment, I can describe how I see it and how I feel it. It is the closest to God it seems I will ever get. It is the closest to “love unfeigned” that I can imagine. If a word could embody this moment, that word would be “pure.” I see power bursting from a mother the way it should be wielded—with humility and submission to higher powers. (Brown 2014)

I was moved by Kayte’s words and by her passion for midwifery and birth. I was also intrigued by her journey and how she credited her not-so-distant ancestor for shaping her decision to become a midwife.

Later in responding to my questionnaire, Kayte reiterated the experience she had shared months earlier on the *Exponent*. It is a story that she had more than certainly told on a number of occasions. There are a few variations in Kayte’s narrative, but the substance of her story is unchanged. Barre Toelken’s conservative-dynamic continuum helps us understand the disparity. He defines the continuum as “a combination of both changing (‘dynamic’) and static (‘conservative’) elements that evolve and change through sharing, communication and performance” (Sims and Stephens 2005, 81). Time, experience, and audience, shape both story and performance. In her interview, Kayte unpacked greater details regarding her earliest influences:

My mother had all her eight children (except me, ironically) with a midwife in the hospital. When I was about 12, my mother became a doula. I vividly remember talking about my birth and the births of my siblings with my family. Birth was always a normal thing to talk about. I grew up watching birth videos with my mom. This normalcy was a huge influence for me to go in the direction of midwifery. I always wanted to help

people, and seriously considered nursing as a career until I went to college. When I went to college, I realized that my calling was to work with women. Midwifery was just the natural progression. My faith did not come into play until after I started my training to become a midwife and started working as a midwives assistant. I feel like it is my calling—a spiritual calling—to work with women through midwifery. That calling is confirmed with every woman I help guide through her journey through birth. I feel my Heavenly Mother’s hands working through mine. My faith grounds my decision to be a midwife. . . . My great-great-grandmother, Sarah Indiaetta Young, was a midwife trained by the famous Mormon midwife, Ellis Shipp. She (Young) worked on the Arizona frontier as both midwife and general healer for her community. She delivered over 1000 babies and never lost a mother or a baby in childbirth. She was also the person people went to in the community when the local doctor couldn’t help. She talks about, in her personal history, how she was always guided and inspired to know what to do, even in situations in which she wasn’t familiar. With that history, I felt like midwifery was more in my bones—a part of who I was. In deciding to become a midwife, I felt like I was carrying the tradition of my foremother. . . . It is hard to explain, but the very first birth I went to as an assistant, I just felt like I belonged there. I feel like midwifery is my duty. It is part of who I am. Midwifery is not just my profession; it is what I was made to do. The closest to heaven I have ever felt has been at a birth—not in the temple or at church or other typical church related experiences. (Brown 2014)

Anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff argued in her work on ritual, storytelling, and aging that personal narrative is a ceremonious event where “one becomes self-aware of the way in which she envisions the self—who she is, or at least, who she believes she is” (1992, 86). That sense of

becoming is evident in the narratives like Kayte's that I collected. As Kayte articulated, "It was in my bones," "I belonged there," and "It is a part of who I am." Her words remind me of Lowenthal's assertion that "We are at home in it because it *is* our home—the past is where we come from" (2015, 4). Family history effects how we interpret our place in the world, among our kin, and in our personal lives, as is Kayte's experience.

Often, we narrate our life stories as based on our association with others. Psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen has referred to personal identity as "lodged within the realm of relations" and as "fundamentally a social undertaking" (Gergen 2005, 112). This type of anchoring emerges as a major thread in the narratives I collected. Kayte is one of many women who locate themselves as part of a larger legacy of Mormon women. The feminist networks that my contributors describe throughout this thesis depict continuity between generations of women. That link is empowering to them.

Jenne

Folklorist Ray Cashman defined nostalgia as, "a cultural practice that enables people to generate meaning in the present through selective visions of the past" (2006, 138). Similarly, literary scholar Svetlana Boym described it as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed," ("*nostos* meaning return home, and *algia* meaning longing") (2001, XIII). Nostalgia has been a concern for many scholars who understood it as a phenomenon that favors the privileged (Tannock 1995, 454; Ladino 2004, 88). For example, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges have examined the use of nostalgia to propagate male-centric worldviews in literature, contending, "*Nostalgia* is not just a sentiment but also a rhetorical practice. In the imaginative past of nostalgic writers, men were men, women were women, and reality was real." (2013, 3)

Others have used nostalgia as a way of maintaining an *authentic* national identity, for example, the proliferation of pro-Trump rhetoric in the United States that longs for a less diverse America. ([https://www.huffingtonpost.com/gregory-rodriguez/political-nostalgia\\_b\\_11199804.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/gregory-rodriguez/political-nostalgia_b_11199804.html)).

While nostalgia can be used to perpetuate old claims, the women in this research have shown that nostalgia can also be a valuable tool for mining the past for personal meaning and purpose. According to Jennifer Ladino, nostalgia “can be a starting point from which to construct alternate narratives and build positive social change” (Ladino 2004, 90). This might include giving voice to marginal groups including women. In Jenne Alderks’s case, nostalgia for early Mormon midwifery led to a revival with the hope of creating a more empowering role for Mormon women.

Jenne recalled being drawn to the doula profession as she recovered from a traumatic birth. While her recovery was slow, she found inspiration in the stories of early LDS women:

Since my freshman year of college, I knew I wanted to work with parents across the transition to parenthood but I did not know about doula as a professional option. It wasn't until I was pregnant with my first that I learned about the important role they play in helping a mother feel supported across the transition to parenthood and through birth. I started considering becoming a birth worker at that time but was struggling with PTSD from a traumatic childbirth. I didn't know if I would ever be free of triggers around birth. As I healed from my trauma and began following [General Relief Society] President Beck's counsel to learn the history of Relief Society women, I became inspired by the fact that there was a time in the church when midwives were called by the prophet to attend birthing women. I saw how valuable that would be for the women of the church today and how very much I wanted to be supported by an LDS midwife and doula in my

pregnancies (Alderks 2014).

Jenne's experience brought to life the stories of nineteenth-century Mormon women which shaped her conception of women's healthcare and her sense of self.

As was the case with many of my contributors, Jenne's experience with hospital birth was formative. Through her struggle with postpartum PTSD she recognized the need for women-centered holistic care:

I started out believing that birth was a medical event where the most important part was a safe birth. After getting that experience, I felt that many parts were missing and I sought to find the emotional, spiritual physical and holistic health and preparation support that I felt were missing with the first. I felt that the awe, wonder and reverence for the birthing mother was missing and I knew that a more holistically minded provider would embody that (Alderks 2014).

Jenne believed that a sacred component of birth had been lost in the biomedical approach but that it was embodied in the practices of nineteenth-century Mormon midwives. Her view was profoundly shaped by early Mormon women and their experiences as midwives. She shared that her education—a BS in Marriage, Family, and Human Development and a M.Ed. in Early Childhood Education—took on new meaning as she pursued her doula training. There was a developing continuity between her past and present as well as the Mormon past and her future.

Jenne was a convert of more than a decade at the time of her interview. Unlike Kayte, the kinship that Jenne alludes to is not literal or genetic, although the feeling of being interwoven into the broader narrative of Mormon women is the same. She reflects:

I feel that I was adopted by the early women if [of] the Relief Society when I joined the church and that in some sacred way they became my spiritual foremothers. My midwifery

preceptor was also a convert to the church and she became like a sister to me in addition to being my mentor. While I may not have any ancestral ties with LDS midwives, I feel a strong spiritual connection. . . . I also see that birth work is an important way that femaleness is valued and celebrated by society. Historically, birth workers were women and they were honored for their contribution to society. The LDS church was in the process of restoring that before midwifery was virtually ended by modern medicine. In my pursuit to understand the special gifts and talents given to women, I found that midwifery and caring for new mothers was a rich part of daily life that had been lost in the world today. I had felt the hole in my life and began to feel that one of my life's purposes was to help women feel connected to other women so that we could celebrate and honor the gifts and abilities specially given to women (Alderks 2014).

Jenne's relationship with the past helped her not only overcome the trauma of childbirth but find meaning in it. She also established deep connections between other aspects of her life and, for example, the college degrees she earned gained new significance in light of her new-found heritage.

In 2012 Jenne published an article in *Sunstone Magazine*, a print and online Mormon periodical. The piece was entitled "Rediscovering the Legacy of Mormon Midwives." In it, she predicted a revival was on the horizon:

Many LDS birth bloggers have found one another on the internet and have discovered that many LDS women sense that same calling to midwifery and birth work. Like their LDS ancestors and foremothers, they feel led to working with families to have safe and satisfying birth experiences. More and more LDS women are becoming doulas, midwives, childbirth educators, and lactation consultants. They find that the work can be

family friendly, allowing them to stay home with their children and work part time, sharing childcare and household duties with their husbands.

The article concluded with Jenne's promotion of her website, *Birthing in Zion*, an initiative she had begun the previous year:

The website *Birthing in Zion* ([www.birthinginzion.com](http://www.birthinginzion.com)) began pulling together the LDS birth community to provide a directory of LDS birth workers throughout the Church. An LDS mother can now use the internet to find a midwife, childbirth educator, or doula who shares her religious perspective. In conjunction with the directory, LDS women and mothers are connecting with one another in a Facebook community ([www.facebook.com/LDSbirthworkers](http://www.facebook.com/LDSbirthworkers)) started by the creators of *Birthing in Zion*.

Through this, LDS women today are discovering the legacy of women as primary birth attendants common in the early Church and throughout history. As the community of LDS birth workers and women interested in care provided by their Relief Society sisters grows, there may be a day when a woman will be able to find, in her own stake, an LDS midwife or other birth professional with whom she can share the spiritual dimensions of childbearing and evoke a former time when midwives were revered as female leaders and ministers of the gospel. (Alderks 2012)

When I asked what her vision was for the site, Jenne responded, "My hope is that someday we will have a midwife and doula in every stake of the church" (Alderks 2014).

Jenne's nostalgia for an earlier era of LDS history embodies a feminist agenda of reviving the power associated with the practice of midwifery. In intimate circles, Jenne has invoked the voices and traditions of early LDS members. She comments, "For certain clients, I review the historical washing and anointing of pregnant women that was done as a childbirth



blessing by sisters in the early church,” she explained (Alderks 2014). While she does not perform the ritual, Jenne describes it in order to construct an image of the past that she hopes will, in turn, reconnect LDS women with an earlier heritage. Likewise, her website and the women who participate on it, share their stories in an effort of revival and of hope.

In Chapter Two, I argued that Mormon women experienced spiritual autonomy in Nauvoo. While this is true, the history of nineteenth century Mormon women is complex. For example, polygamy could be liberating, but for many women it was also tragic. Nineteenth century American patriarchy was influential in the church despite Smith’s liberal position on women’s participation. But that is the nature of nostalgia; it subsists within shadows of the past. The past may not literally embody Mormon women’s authority; it certainly did not reach the progressive standards of the twenty first century. But it does signify it. And I perceive that is why, at least for Jenne, nostalgia is such an effective tool.

#### Elizabeth

A third contributor, Elizabeth Smith, gave a narrative that drew on Mormon concepts of angelology. Unlike traditional Christianity, in which angels are considered a distinct species from human beings, Mormon cosmology holds that angels are (1) human spirits ministering before their mortal births, (2) deceased humans in spirit form or (3) resurrected (embodied) humans (See Brown 2014). Angels are often thought of as ministering specifically to their own kin and mortal acquaintances. Joseph F. Smith, the sixth president of the LDS Church, gave a succinct synopsis of this belief:

When messengers are sent to minister to the inhabitants of this earth, they are not strangers, but from among our kindred, friends, and fellow-beings and fellow-servants.

The ancient prophets who died were those who came to visit their fellow creatures upon the earth. They came to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob; . . . such beings . . . waited upon the Savior and administered to him on the Mount. . . . Our fathers and mothers, brothers, sisters and friends who have passed away from this earth, having been faithful, and worthy to enjoy these rights and privileges, may have a mission given them to visit their relatives and friends upon the earth again, bringing from the divine Presence messages of love, of warning, or reproof and instruction, to those whom they had learned to love in the flesh. (Smith 1919, 548)

Kayte and Jenne's use of the past relied on the memory of a historic sisterhood's faith, wisdom, and experience. They were strengthened by their knowledge of a sacred past that many had forgotten. In contrast, Elizabeth's interactions with the past exist in the realm of the supernatural.

Elizabeth, who was in her late fifties at the time of our interview, had been practicing midwifery for nearly thirty years. She was also the mother of eight children, six of whom were delivered at home. As discussed in Chapter One, Elizabeth had begun nursing school in 1983, but then she had a life-changing experience that shifted her trajectory:

I had originally set out to become a nurse. My career goal changed after the birth of my 3rd child, my first home birth, which was a very spiritual experience, after which, I felt personal inspiration that the Lord wanted me to become a midwife. (Smith 2014)

Elizabeth's ancestry was also rooted in a rich history of midwifery, a legacy she was unaware of until after she began her apprenticeship. She comments:

I found out that I was descended from a long line of very prominent midwives. My great great grandmother, Eliza Clark, is still a very well-known name in the history of her area in Louisiana. Even a play is written about her. Her mother and her daughter (my great

grandmother) were also midwives, but there is not as much known about their careers.

(Elizabeth 2014)

In her first communication with me, she told me about sensing the presence of her great-great-grandmother while assisting laboring mothers. Even some of her clients, she reported, had seen her grandmother's apparition during their labors. She noted:

There are many times I have thought to have felt the influence of my Granny Clark during difficult births. Although I do not speak of her to clients, a few have claimed to have seen a short woman, with a white cap at their births. (Smith 2014)

Worried about what I might think about her story, Elizabeth contacted me to assure me of its veracity. She wondered if it was too "far out there" and if it should be excluded from the final manuscript. As folklorist Tom Mould noted in his study of personal revelations among Mormons, there are perceived hazards in sharing spiritual experiences, such as being ridiculed or demeaning the sacred, especially when it is shared with non-Mormons (See Mould 2011, 64-76). I explained to her that there were others who had shared similar experiences, but that she was welcome to withdraw any portion of her interview. I hoped that she would consent to keep it in and take comfort in the fact that her experience was not altogether foreign to other participants. Elizabeth responded with further detail about Granny Clark's visitations:

I have no other explanation but to conclude that the woman is my Granny Clark. One woman saw her standing behind me, during a consultation. Afterward she told me what she saw and I asked for a detailed description. Another client claims she saw her standing in her bedroom doorway after I had left to go home. She described the same woman. Another also saw her standing behind me and added some details to the common description, that she had big breasts and arthritis. I had to call my mom and ask about

these details and she confirmed that Granny Clark had big breasts but she didn't know about the arthritis. She called my aunt who confirmed that she did have arthritis. There is no way that any of these women could have known about Granny Clark or about the other women who saw her. Granny was 4 ft. 11 and a very strong willed woman when it came to principle. She ran off a mob, who came to her home to run off the Mormon missionaries who were sleeping there (they came to her door tired and hungry). She picked up a broom and said, "I brought you into this world and I can take you out! Now, be on your way!" The young men had such respect for her that they turned their horses and rode away. Granny listened to the missionaries and joined the church. She had 16 children. My great grandmother was one of them. I think I am a lot like Granny. (Smith 2014)

Elizabeth identifies with the portrayal of Granny Clark as a strong-willed midwife and mother. However, it is not solely her affection for the image or her conception of self that has summoned Granny Clark from the grave. Granny Clark's apparition was part of a long Western tradition.

The appearance of ministering angels is a recurring motif in Mormon legends (See Cannon 1945; Eliason 2002). It is also, according to Gillian Bennett, a living tradition among a great many others. In *Alas Poor Ghost: Traditions of Belief in Story and Discourse*, a study of memorates told by elderly British women from Manchester, Bennett explains that visitants "are recalled to the realm of the living by events occurring there. They not only have a reason for appearing, but often a role to play" (1999, 50). While Elizabeth did not offer an interpretation, it is clear that she felt a closeness to Granny Clark and that her presence was reassuring—for example, as she noted, she felt the angelic presence "during difficult births." Perhaps, Clark's presence sacralizes the work performed by Elizabeth and the work of the laboring mothers that

she assists. It is also fascinating that the apparition is often seen standing behind Elizabeth, conceivably offering her wisdom and experience.

Ultimately, for Elizabeth, Granny Clark is a symbol of her identity. Her presence confirms her great-great granddaughter's decision to practice midwifery and assists Elizabeth's successful navigation of even the most difficult scenarios. Granny Clark's story continues to expand as family, clientele, playwrights, and Elizabeth's own experience shapes her personal life narrative, reminding Elizabeth of where she comes from and directing the person she will become.

The three women in this chapter who shared their experiences show ways that the past can shape identity. I have argued that our construction of the past affects the way we perceive the present and impacts the way we engage with the future. The women here have been influenced by the stories of their ancestors and a golden age of Mormonism in which women officiated at birth. While these histories have had little place in the official publications of the Church, they are immortalized in the stories of contemporary Mormon midwives and doulas. Birthworkers share these narratives with each other and their clients in person and through the internet where online groups provide safe spaces for women to exchange their stories and beliefs. The women's stories express vernacular theologies of contemporary Mormon women, and this is the subject of the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### HOLISTIC BIRTH AND THE CONCEPTION OF A MOTHERHOOD IDENTITY

Many have jested that the perpetuation of human life is only possible because mothers forget the agonies of labor. Yet mothers do not always eschew the memory of birth. In fact, women's very bodies, having been transformed through the process, can serve as a type of remembrance. It is what Religious Studies scholar Pamela Klassen has referred to as "embodied memory" (2001, 13). This chapter explores how my contributors have probed the memories of their experiences for insights about themselves, women, and their place in the world. They show how women attempt to capture and utilize the memory of pain in mundane and extraordinary ways. As well as, how such memories give way to theological invention.

Many of my contributors spoke of their labor pain as epistemic or revelatory in nature. They perceived labor as both literal and metaphorical expressions of women's propitious power. The fact is that birthing women are not passive subjects, rather they are active participants in the often creative and personal ritual of natural birth. While I am not the first to explore the empowerment that women experience in foregoing the use of drugs in labor, the Mormon example offers a unique insight into the tradition and the women who live it.

Scholar Carol P. Christ has argued, "The expression of women's spiritual quest is integrally related to the telling of women's stories" (1995, 1). This is true of the women who have participated in this research. In the following pages, I argue that their stories depict a type of priestly dimension to motherhood, examining the laboring woman in a presiding role, the post-mortal ministries of female attendants at birth, apparitions of the female divine, and labor as a metaphor for Christ's suffering. While my specific focus is on how Mormon women have

navigated patriarchy, these themes also highlight how human experience breathes life into theology. Religion scholar Linda Hogan has defined feminist theology as theology “born out of women’s experiences” (1997, 16). In this chapter I refer to the beliefs of my contributors as vernacular theologies, but they are feminist theologies as well. They embody transformative possibilities for the Mormon tradition by adding flesh to the doctrine of the Church, revealing the importance of women’s experiences and giving voice to their concerns.

### Interpreting Equality within the Mormon Family

As mentioned earlier, the family is central to Mormon soteriology and yet, women’s roles are vaguely defined. Birth is one means by which some women locate themselves within the Mormon family and articulate their sacred roles. To fully understand how they navigate the ambiguity and craft their own vernacular theologies regarding womanhood and motherhood, it is important first to understand Mormonism’s official discourse on the family. As discussed briefly in Chapter One, two major doctrinal innovations of the Nauvoo period were family relationship enduring in the afterlife, and human deification. After Smith’s death, his close associates, including one of his plural wives, added flesh to the doctrine of deification by revealing a belief in the feminine divine (see: Derr 1996). This insight divulged that God was espoused and that even his family was eternal. Furthermore, it revealed that at least one half of this divine matrimony was a woman. Doctrine on the matter has remained vague, however, with only the title of mother giving any indication of her identity. This topic will be returned to in greater detail later in the chapter.

Later, several major shifts within Mormonism, most notably the Church’s disavowal of plural marriage in 1890, altered the social makeup of the LDS family. In keeping with American

culture and the United States' response to economic hardship and social upheaval in the wake of WWII, Mormonism promoted traditional family life (Harris 2013, 18-23; Airhart and Bendroth 23-25). Official Church discourse embraced 1950s American sentiment and strict gender norms.

In 1977, the Church publicly opposed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) fearing ratification would result in catastrophic social change. Apostle Boyd K. Packer referred to the ERA as an issue of "critical concern," stating that "Some government officials are sure to see their responsibility, not just to effect *equality* between men and women, but to attempt by regulation to remove all of the *differences* between them" (Packer 1977). While leaders of the Church spoke of women's inequality as deplorable, they vehemently opposed the ERA as a viable solution. Packer in his remarks concluded:

I am for protecting the rights of a woman to be a woman, a feminine, female woman; a wife and a mother. I am for protecting the rights of a man to be a man, a masculine, male man; a husband and a father. I am for protecting the rights of children to be babies and children and youth, to be nurtured in a home and in a family. I am for recognizing the inherent God-given differences between men and women. (Packer 1977)LDS leaders perceived the ERA as a threat to Mormonism's model of family that depended on complimentary gender roles.

*The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, issued by the First Presidency of the Church in 1995, confirmed this stance. An excerpt from the document reads:

The family is ordained of God. Marriage between man and woman is essential to His eternal plan. Children are entitled to birth within the bonds of matrimony, and to be reared by a father and a mother who honor marital vows with complete fidelity. . . . By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are



primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners. (Hinckley 1995)

While the proclamation did not introduce novel beliefs, it did tie long-held notions to prophetic utterance. Since its release, the document has been continually cited from the pulpit. As framed print art, the proclamation hangs on the walls of local ward houses and congregants' homes. While the document has never been inserted in the official canon, its wide distribution reflects its weight.

Still, the language of the proclamation requires some interpretation. There is paradoxical rhetoric that has been a source of anxiety for some women. The use of "equal partners," which implies a more contemporary notion of family dynamics, contrasts with that of a strict male headship, which is also implied in the proclamation: "fathers are to preside over their families." How these two concepts coalesce within the home is a matter of individual family interpretation and application. The document also refers to an individual's sex as "an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose" (Hinckley 1995). Most have interpreted this clause as an adverse response to homosexuality and, more specifically, gay marriage, but its implications clearly impact how heterosexuals perceive and perform their gender roles as well.

One of the most enigmatic problems faced specifically by women, then, is how they fit into the broader picture. Carol P. Christ has argued,

Religious symbol systems focused around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be fully legitimate or wholly beneficiate . . . she can never have the experience that is freely available to every man and boy in her culture,

of having her full sexual identity affirmed as being in the image and likeness of God.

(1979, 275)

The doctrine of deification is acutely challenging for women who believe that there is a female image of divinity because, despite Mormonism's incorporation of the female divine for nearly two centuries, both the textual and the lived tradition are almost wholly devoid of her presence. This means that while men are tutored through the abundant representations of male divinity to fulfill their eternal destinies, Mormon women have no real conception of an explicitly female expression of godhood.

The importance of the family in Mormonism is key to understanding the empowerment some Mormon women find in natural childbirth. While it preserves traditional values and gender ideologies, it also expands the scope of women's roles by offering the mother optimum agency. Home birth allows women to display to their spouses the craft of womanhood and the unadulterated power of her biological inheritance, undisturbed by pain medication or preemptive intervention. The more conventional image of motherhood is not erased but renegotiated in terms of a woman's sacrifice and power. While women maintain their roles as nurturers, they also take up the mantle of presiding and performing sacred ordinances in birth, priestly roles traditionally held by men.

## Women and the Priesthood

As discussed earlier, Mormon men who meet worthiness standards are ordained to offices of the priesthood. This allows them to perform sacred and salvific ordinances and preside within the church structure. While women are not eligible for ordination to priesthood offices, some men and women have argued that women may already possess priesthood or the power to act in

God's name for the salvation of man. Both sexes are taught that the "fullness of the priesthood" can be obtained by couples who marry in the temple. This suggests that women have access to the priesthood, although how and when that is manifested is unclear. In a 2014 address to the Church, Elder Dallin H. Oaks said, "We are not accustomed to speaking of women having the authority of the priesthood in their church callings, but what other authority can it be?" (Oaks 2014). Oaks argued that while women are not ordained to the priesthood, they can be delegated priesthood power to perform their specific responsibilities. On the one hand, this elevates women in the church by recognizing the priesthood authority they possess when performing their church duties, say as a Relief Society president administering to the women of her ward. On the other hand, women maintain subservient positions under presiding male leaders who delegate that authority. In the same talk, Oaks remarked that while women are not ordained to the priesthood, they possess a power unique to their gender. Quoting J. Rueben Clark, a prominent leader in the church (circa 1930s-1960s), he explained:

The greatest power God has given to His sons cannot be exercised without the companionship of one of His daughters, because only to His daughters has God given the power to be a creator of bodies ... so that God's design and the Great Plan might meet fruition. This is the place of our wives and of our mothers in the Eternal Plan. They are not bearers of the Priesthood; they are not charged with carrying out the duties and functions of the Priesthood; nor are they laden with its responsibilities; they are builders and organizers under its power, and partakers of its blessings, possessing the complement of the Priesthood powers and possessing a function as divinely called, as eternally important in its place as the Priesthood itself.

This statement, like the family proclamation, draws on the concept of complementary gender roles, but, likewise, it also stratifies that power.

Statements like those made by Oaks (or J. Ruben Clark) have infrequently been given over the pulpit, but their beliefs have, nonetheless, shaped women on the ground. Likewise, women have creatively interpreted their words through their lived experiences. Through the aching pulsation of contractions and the expulsion of membrane and blood, some women come to understand their power. As Kirsten Bennett, a mother of one, explained in her interview, “I believe birth is a process of priestesshood” (Bennett 2014). By this Kirsten means that there is a transformative element to birth that she views as sacred. It is a sentiment echoed throughout the narratives I have collected. While the nuances vary, the belief is consistent: childbirth is one manifestation of women’s authority. Even if it is not officially articulated in the Church, women’s priestly authority is manifest within the home and specifically through birth.

### The Importance of Home in Home Birth

In Chapter One, I explored women’s rationale for home birth. Women can be empowered in an out-of-hospital setting through the avoidance of unnecessary interventions and the autonomy of midwife-assisted labor. However, the home itself also holds significance. As Sociologist Lee Rainwater has asserted:

The house becomes a place of maximum exercise of individual autonomy, minimum conformity to the formal and complex rules of public demeanor. The house acquires a sacred character from its complex intertwining with the self and from the symbolic character it has as a representation of the family. (1966, 24)

That is, home reflects an intimate world. It is a space where the everyday and the sacred intersect. As Rachel Steenblik, a mother of two, stated:

I have a strong belief that homes are among the most sacred spaces, and that they can be temples, like our bodies. I wanted my babe born at home for many reasons. I think hospitals are not the most safe spaces, and that giving birth at home gives woman and baby a safer experience and avoids unnecessary measures, but I also wanted to give birth at home because then we would be home. We would be in our home family, safe, temple space. This is where she would live. That is where she belongs. I wanted her in her home from the very beginning. I didn't want her to have to come home. She was welcome there. She was already there. I do feel like it made my space even more sacred. When we moved away from that apartment, and said goodbye, I cried and cried. It was hard to leave that space where I was strong and vulnerable, and gave my daughter life. (Steenblik 2004)

For some women, the hospital simply does not feel safe. While the hospital boasts the reassurances of modern technology, women who give birth at home perceive safety in multifaceted ways. Birth requires a complex negotiation of power, one that allows women to be both vulnerable and assertive, and it demands that couples work together to create a safe environment.

Women may choose the home not simply because of the symbolic value it embodies but because of the literal family relationships that it encompasses. Angela G. [last name changed], a midwife spoke of the home birth of her first child as “transformative” and “empowering.” She explained, “Birthing is a spiritual experience . . . if it is honored AND experienced the way it was designed to be It strengthens your relationship with God, strengthens marriages and strengthens

faith” (G. 2014). While midwives are the dominant caregiver during labor and delivery in home birth, family tends to play an active role. Husbands, mothers, and even children may provide support with their presence. Several women discussed how their families offered comfort by preparing the home, giving massages, or simply offering words of affirmation. Cynthia Tarnasky stated that home birth “cemented . . . the family as a unit” and “fostered an awareness of every member’s individual contribution” (Tarnasky 2014).

Of course, the individual whose role becomes most defined in home birth is the woman’s. The long-standing association between women and the home has tended to define women narrowly. Home birth allows women to reimagine those boundaries and negotiate their power within the wall of their homes. As Rachel indicated above, some women feel that home birth transforms the domestic sphere; for them the act of birth sacralizes a previously mundane setting. While feminist discourse has attempted to reclaim the home as a site of power, society continues to view women’s work as insignificant, if not altogether invisible. In home birth, however, women’s work is visible and is unquestionably significant. Even if only momentarily, a mother redefines her place in the home within a discourse of power that is rarely associated with women. In some ways, because of the home’s centrality to Mormon culture, home birth may appear to reify core cultural expectations and beliefs about the Mormon family, such as maintaining women’s association with the home, for example. However, as we will explore, it challenges them as well.

### Presiding at Birth

While men “preside over their families,” there is a space where women also preside, at least according to a 1915 publication of the *Relief Society Magazine*. It reads: “Always and ever

until the last century have women presided as high priestesses in the chamber of birth” (1915, 402). While the article referred to midwives, not mothers, the concept that birth is a domain where women’s power can be actualized persists in vernacular Mormon thought. Karin Hardman, whose story I explored in the introduction, came to this conclusion after three very painful hospital deliveries, a stillbirth and two Cesarean sections. I have known Karin for over a decade and birth has always been one of her great passions. Her conviction inspired me to explore home birth as a viable option at a point when birth was not yet in my foreseeable future. At the time, she was a mother of three children, a boy and two girls, and pregnant with her fourth child. As mentioned in Chapter One, she is now a mother of seven, the final five of whom were delivered safely at home

Based on the evocative image of laboring women described by Karin in her interview, it is clear that birth has shaped her beliefs regarding Mormon femininity:

My feelings about the sacred aspect of birth have changed massively since I started birthing at home. I know it is not the right place for everyone. I know that some women just don't feel safe there. But I know that for me, it is the right place. I believe very strongly that birth is a similitude of Christ's sacrifice and atonement and baptism points to both Christ and to birth. I believe that women have a duty; obligation or responsibility to preside at birth. My faith has become more unshakeable as I contemplate on my births and what they have taught me. Of course, I want all women to have that opportunity, but I do realize we have agency. Birth is a very vulnerable time, and it is a time that we can commune with the heavens easily. . . . Watching a father fall in love with his wife while she is birthing is amazing. He finally becomes aware of her power. Almost like he always thought she would be totally dependent on him, but then recognizes she is powerful

beyond his reckoning. There are those who argue that Priesthood and motherhood are not necessarily equivalent. But childbearing (and its responsibilities) and priesthood is. As women, we mother. We have received our endowment for the power we needed outside of this life. Before this life. Birth is an ordinance. Even for women who cannot or choose not to bear children, they are part of this legacy; part of this power and responsibility. Maybe I speak from a place of ignorance, but with the experiences I have had, I hold it to be true. I believe that God wants us to have access to this power. Watching a mother birth unmedicated and in control of her experience is watching a woman become cloaked in her power. Almost like a mantle. She is better prepared to deal with the craziness that being a mother throws at her. It is as Elohim [God the Father] has designed it. (Hardman 2014)

In her interview, Karin attempted to solve the paradox of *The Family: A Proclamation*, particularly the quandary of spousal equality, by pointing to a realm where a female priestly power is actualized by woman and recognized by man. She views the pain as providing the laboring mother with lucidity, where anesthesia might otherwise conceal her capacity. As Klassen observed, “many home-birthing women consider that to feel their own pain is to reclaim their own power” (Klassen 182).

Melissa Nelms also described birth and motherhood as a sacred equivalent to priesthood. She discussed the sanctity that only a mother can experience:

My faith has been confirmed through the spiritual “high” experienced in birth, and vice versa. I know birth is normal because my faith reinforces that my body is divine and capable. . . . I am not a bra burning feminist or a typical Molly Mormon, but rather a humanist. I think women are just as strong, and occasionally strong-er, than men. But I



also think that men are just as strong, and occasionally strong-er, than women. The privilege I have had of carrying and giving birth to two children has allowed me to experience a plethora of opinions about gender in the church. While I agree on several social issues that could change, I do not feel having the priesthood is something I would want. SO many times I have heard "motherhood = fatherhood, not the priesthood" and I can't help but disagree. Once born, there are a number of parenting roles shared by men and women, but my husband will never know what it feels like to birth our children. He will never know the bonding of nursing or how to interpret the cries of our children. Motherhood is sacred above fatherhood, and the priesthood is a way for men to have a responsibility to the Lord. Does that make sense? Heavenly Father cannot bless us as He has without a Heavenly Mother. It is as simple as that. They do different things, but the sacredness is the same. I am wholly empowered by birth and motherhood, but I am also not the type that has ever felt trodden down. Giving birth reaffirmed the confidence I have always had in my ability to become a divine being. (Nelms 2014)

These stories bring a matriarchal presence into an otherwise patriarchal tradition. If men have priesthood, then the comparable female role is to give birth. Many of my contributors recognize the power inherent in their role of bearing children.

### Transcending the Veil

Home birth can be a locus of spiritual manifestations. Diana Janopaul stated: "I think birth is one of the most spiritual experiences ever. The veil is very thin! We are seeing a new person come straight from the other side and it is amazing. The love in the room is felt by all." Melanie Lennon echoed this sentiment when she referred to birth as the "greatest role we

[women] can play in mortality,” the joy of which is derived from “step[ing] so close to the veil” (Janopaul 2014). “The veil is thin” is a sentiment that repeatedly surfaced throughout my interviews. Many, like Diana, discussed Mormonism’s teaching of a spiritual existence that precedes mortal conception, or the “pre-existence.” It is an essential facet of Mormon theology that highlights humanity’s eternal nature and divine heritage (Brown 1992). When Latter-day Saints refer to mankind as “children of God,” the maxim is often intended literally as compared to the adoption theology embraced by many mainstream Christian denominations. This unique theological concept teaches the necessity of birth and that the first commandment given to Adam and Eve to “multiply and replenish the earth” (Genesis 1:28) is a directive from God to embody his progeny. As touched on briefly in Chapter Three, Mormons believe embodiment is a crucial precursor of salvation and exaltation. First, it allows adherents to gain knowledge and experience which Mormons perceive as physical inheritances, and second, it allows them to become like God, who is an exalted man of “flesh and bone.” While the role of women is evident, the correlation between women’s bodies and the doctrine of embodiment has rarely been the focus of Mormon sermons.

In several of the themes that I examine here, the concept of embodiment is specifically relevant to how women interpret womanhood. Lizz Pope explained: “I believe that women were divinely appointed to be able to bring God’s spirit children into this world with a physical body of their own” (Pope 2014). For my contributors there is unanimity in their views of birth as a sacred act that bridges the gap between this world and the last. Analiesa Leonhardt described women as “portals into mortality” and their “mortal frames as the veils between heaven and earth” (Leonhardt 2014). Others referred to transcending the veil during birth. Becky S. [last name changed] talked about the sacred atmosphere created by laboring mother and descending

babe. She stated: “I have felt the gates of heaven open and huge outpourings of support be available for the mom to draw on as she does some of the hardest work she might ever do in her life. . . . I have known angels are in the room” (B. 2014).

The words of my contributors depict childbirth as an act that is as crucial as it is sacred. Childbirth, like death, advances mankind from one point in its eternal destiny to the next. As women draw spirits from their premortal existence into mortality, the veil between heaven and earth is frayed. This allows a cast of women, ancestral figures, divine beings, birth attendants and laboring mothers, to all share stage during one of the most intimate and transformative acts of womanhood. Together my contributors creatively shape the eschatological landscape of Mormonism with their theological interpretations of women’s roles.

#### Christ Figures: The Mother in Mormon Soteriology

Many contributors articulated a sanctification that occurred in a woman's submission to the pains of childbirth. Women found meaning in the hardship of labor and in the agonizing and emotionally draining moments of the ordeal by looking to birth as a metaphor for the suffering Christ. In each narrative, women captured different aspects of the Christ story that brought significance to their own. For example, Analiesa compared Christ’s broken body with those of laboring women. She explained, “The sacrament honoring Christ’s death is analogous to the sacrament of birth performed by women. With the spilling of their own blood and the tearing of their own flesh, women bring life into the world” (Leonhardt 2014). Analiesa views birth as a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice, like baptism or the Eucharist, an ordinance of salvific proportion. Like Christ’s sacrifice, in childbirth pain and joy are intertwined. As Analiesa points out, it is the suffering that gives way to life, eternal or otherwise.

The experience of childbirth is difficult for many women to articulate but as folklorist

Diane Goldstein has argued, metaphor allows us to express the ineffable (1995, 35). Comparing birthing to Christ's death on the cross provides some women with a powerful vehicle for interpreting their experiences and their world. This is true for Olivia Garrison who found comfort in the image of the suffering Christ following the long and painful delivery of her son. Olivia was raised believing home birth was the ideal. She explained:

My mom had me and my older brother at home with a midwife, so I grew up thinking that that's the way I would have children. My mom always related fond stories of her home-birth experiences so I thought it sounded very comfortable compared to a cold, sterile hospital. (Garrison 2014)

When the time came, Olivia hired a midwife and prepared for the birth of her son by "reading about mindfulness and pain management techniques" and "purchasing a birth tub." Olivia's mother and younger sister flew in from out of town to provide support in addition to that of her husband, who planned on attending. They remained at her side throughout her labor. Olivia stated:

My husband stayed by my side: letting me lean on him during heavy contractions, crying with me, doing anything to try to comfort me. As we got closer to the baby being born, my mom kept my face cool with a wet rag and gave me small sips of cold water. I remember that being so comforting! She also gave me confidence when it was lacking, telling me that I could do it, and that the baby would be here soon. (Garrison 2014)

However, after twenty-four hours of agonizing labor, Olivia was transferred to the hospital where her labor persisted an additional twelve hours. The experience had been difficult and not at all what she had imagined. She recalled:

I am actually terrified of having another child due to the long, hard labor I experienced

(32 hours). It was the most mentally and physically trying experience of my life. Nothing prepared me (or could have prepared me) for that reality. . . . I thought that birth would be more of a spiritual experience than it was and that God would play a greater, more visible role in the experience (although I guess that's silly to say because having a child is a MIRACLE and nothing denotes a God more than seeing a precious new baby). I just didn't feel very spiritual during the whole process is what I'm trying to say. I felt barbaric and raw and alone. I remember thinking, "Oh crap I'm the only one who can have this baby" and feeling very overwhelmed and panicked (almost suffocated) by this thought. I wish that I could have remembered God more during my experience. I'm going to prep myself in some way for next time to do this to hopefully feel more empowered by knowing that God is by my side. But maybe it's kind of like how Christ was "left alone" on the cross so that he could truly prove himself? (Garrison 2014)

Looking back, Christ's lonely cry "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me" (Matthew 27:46) not only took on new meaning for Olivia but also gave purpose to her personal suffering and her loneliness.

The correlation between Christ's atonement and childbirth opens the door to new theological innovations. As Jenne explained, "The process of birth echoes and testifies of the atonement of Christ just as he descended into the grips of intense experiences and then rose triumphant having performed a vital task that is a necessary step in the salvation of another" (Alderks 2014). In these stories birthing mothers have found meaning in the agony of Christ, the loneliness of his suffering, and the necessity of his trials. In birth they became symbols of the Savior.

## The Post-Mortal Ministries of Women

As discussed in Chapter Two, women often tend to seek out other women during birth. They find strength in relationships. To draw on the language of Victor Turner, there can be “communitas” in the act of birth (Turner 1996, 96). That is, labor represents a stage of liminality when a pregnant woman is transformed into a mother. It is viewed by some as a sacred heritage that bonds women despite a myriad of factors that might otherwise divide them, such as age or culture. In fact, one aspect of a woman’s decision to give birth under the care of a midwife or doula is often her desire for female assistance. Many of my participants believe that while their husband provides support that is critical to their positive birth experience, women offer them empathy based on personal experience that a man cannot. Even if a female birth worker has not personally given birth, womanhood offers her a unique lens for supporting other women that a man does not have based on their shared biology.

One of the most fascinating themes among the interviews I conducted expands on the longing for female assistance when birthing. This development of a feminist network at times extends beyond the grave as women look to their foremothers for guidance and request their presence during labor. For example, Chrissie Holmes placed a picture of her deceased grandmother within view during labor to remind her that she “had gone through the pain” and to envision that she was now watching over her (Holmes 2014). The sentiment that Chrissie seemed to communicate, and many others echoed was, if she—a woman I respect deeply—can endure xyz, then I can endure labor.

The theological innovation of ministering women then appears to develop out of women’s search for support in birth as a specifically female, although inherently lonely, space. While birth is an event women can relate to broadly, it is also an act that must be performed by

individuals. Women who describe the supernatural do so as a means of bridging the gap between the individual's experience and that shared by the community at large. Rachel also drew on the strength of women as she moved in and out of contractions and in those first moments of bonding that followed delivery. She stated:

I have a heightened belief in the power and strength of women, the wisdom of their bodies, the presence and care of God during birth, and the helpfulness of trained and caring women. I felt the need for women, specifically, so strongly. ... I mentioned praying to be sustained in birth, and strengthened by Heavenly Mother. I also prayed that my deceased ancestors would be with me. I was especially thinking of Spencer's mother who had passed away the year before, and my granny and grandpa (whose names I would be using for my daughter). I don't know for sure if there were there, but I did feel sustained and supported. I have a hope that they were there and a belief, a sense. There was a part after birth, when I sang Cora the song that Spencer and I sang her in the womb. It was the song Spencer's mom sang to him when he was small. His sister felt her mom's presence then, when we sang it to Cora together. I also mentioned Aunika [Rachel's doula] being inspired to tell me that the way I gave birth was like the women I study. That was extremely helpful for me. I pictured Emma [Joseph Smith's wife] who gave birth so many times, and who was able to keep her children so few times, and Patty Sessions who midwifed for so many births, and my mom, who gave birth naturally seven times, who gave birth naturally for me. Thinking of my Mormon foremothers gave me strength and courage and a belief that I could do it. (Steenblik 2014)

Psychologist Dan P. McAdams argues, "Stories often bring together into an understandable frame disparate ideas, characters, happenings, and other elements of life that were previously set

apart” (McAdams 2010). This was the case with Rachel’s story as it brought together generations of women. It was a common theme in many of my interviews as participants described women, particularly family, standing at the foot of the veil to offer support. These narratives of connection support folklorist Gillian Bennett’s argument that “It seems to be sociability itself—interest in others, and especially love of the family—that most often predisposes women towards belief” in the supernatural (1999, 28). As in Elizabeth Smith’s memorate and the visitation of Granny Clark, the presence of a deceased female progenitor is understood as community.

Tessa Rosales offered another example of feeling the presence of deceased progenitors, and especially women, during birth. Tessa wanted the birth of her daughter to be a sacred experience. She explained, “I felt strongly that I should experience childbirth the way Heavenly Father intended it to be experienced. I wanted to know my full potential as a woman.” Tessa, like many other women in this study, viewed labor as a revelation of a woman’s innermost strength. She recalled that she wrote, meditated, read positive material, and spoke positively about her birth plan. Prayer was also an important aspect of that preparation. She explained, “I put my faith in Heavenly Father.” As is common among home birthers, Tessa carefully staged a sacred space. She cleaned her bedroom, created “lots of bright and white,” and hung her birth affirmation intentionally on the wall. She explained that during labor she “only wanted the table lamps on. It was the middle of the night so the house and neighborhood were quiet and still.” In attendance was Tessa’s husband and a certified nurse midwife (CNM), a Latter-day Saint who Tessa praised as being spiritually intuitive and “hands off during labor and birth.”

However, during the “pushing stage,” when exhaustion took over, Tessa recounted that a third presence entered the room. It was then she recognized the familiar touch. It was her mother who had passed years earlier. Tessa commented, “I know the veil is so thin at times of death, but



also birth. . . . I could feel my mother's presence. She was holding my hand, quiet and calm but reassuring and anchoring me in the moment." She continued, "I will cherish the birth of my daughter because of how close I felt to my mother" (Rosales 2014).

While Tessa shared only fragments of her birth experience, including her sacred encounter with her mother, I was impressed with the tenderness with which she spoke of this experience. The image of three generations of women being present is poignant: the babe, who was descending through her mother's birth canal into mortality; the mother, who is in the height of physical exertion; and the grandmother, who has transcended the veil to strengthen and elevate her child. The story highlights the female passing on of the sacred rite of birth from the cradle to the grave.

It also connects to a larger theological tradition of Mormonism: deceased ancestors and relatives coming as angelic visitors to their kin. Stories like Tessa's or Elizabeth's are a part of Mormon folk belief where family members span the gap between life and death. The narratives allow women to creatively author vernacular theologies about women's vital roles in life as well as in death.

### Heavenly Mother and Woman's Potential

There is another presence that some women sense at birth, namely the female divine or "Heavenly Mother." However, despite her being a part of Mormon theology, discussing the Mother is often thought of as taboo. This has limited the Mormon view of the scope of her role. Most often in official rhetoric, she is evoked to emphasize the eternal nature of families. For example, the apostle Bruce R. McConkie taught:

An exalted and glorified Man of Holiness (Moses 6:57) could not be a Father unless a Woman of like glory, perfection, and holiness was associated with him as a Mother. The begetting of children makes a man a father and a woman a mother whether we are dealing with man in his mortal or immortal state. (1996, 516)

Not surprisingly, it was a woman, Eliza R. Snow, the second president of the Relief Society, who first fully articulated the longing desire for a relationship with this female divinity. The third and fourth stanzas of her poem entitled “Invocation of the Eternal Father and Mother,” today known as the hymn “O My Father,” reads:

In the heav’ns are parents single?  
No, the thought makes reason stare!  
Truth is reason; truth eternal  
Tells me I’ve a mother there.

When I leave this frail existence,  
When I lay this mortal by,  
Father, Mother, may I meet you  
In your royal courts on high (Snow 1845)?

Jill Derr, historian and author of a study on Eliza R. Snow, discusses this cherished hymn and its historical significance in the Mormon tradition. She writes:

While “O My Father” makes reference to a number of doctrines important to Latter-day Saints, it often has been best remembered for its mention of Mother in Heaven. Eliza’s declaration of the reality of Mother in Heaven is unforgettable because it is simple and personal, because it comes from a woman, and because there is a paucity of reference to

the concept elsewhere. . . . To what extent did she help define the doctrine? Both men and women have repeatedly asked that question, and it must be explored. But a fresh question more relevant to Eliza's personal journey must also be addressed: To what extent did the doctrine help Eliza define herself? (Derr 1996, 98)

The answer is simple: the poem was crucial not only in defining Snow's journey but also in making room for all Latter-day Saint women in the Mormon cosmos (Derr 1996).

And yet, since then little has been said in official LDS doctrine about the Mother described in Snow's poetry. Who is the Mother and to what extent does she intervene in the lives of her mortal children? In the past several years, there has been a palpable rise in interest in understanding the relevance and role of Heavenly Mother. The rapid growth of women's blogs, personal narratives, poetry, and songs related to the Mother reveal a grassroots movement (See: Hunt-Steenblik 2017; de Azevedo 2017; Olsen 2010; Brooks 2012; Pearson 1995). These Mormon women have expressed their longing for a mother. Their words, like those of Eliza R. Snow, further integrate women into the Mormon cosmos.

There has been speculation as to why our knowledge of the divine mother is sparse. In my experience, the most common explanation that I have encountered is that Heavenly Father desires to protect Heavenly Mother from being profaned. Mormon feminists criticize this theory for perpetuating a false dichotomy of man's strength and woman's fragility (see: Brooks, 2012). Another theory in Mormon folk discourse is that the Mother is simply attending another errand, although many have asked why a loving mother would abandon her children (see: Olsen 2010). Much of the folklore surrounding Heavenly Mother attempts to interpret her absence rather than expand on her identity. This is problematic for those who feel that a personal relationship is ideal.

As many have maintained, when a woman knows her mother, she knows herself. However, mother and daughter develop a new relationship as a woman's innate strength is revealed, at least in the stories I have collected. More than one-third of my contributors mentioned Heavenly Mother. In doing so, they further develop their vernacular theologies. As one woman contended, women “project” (Steenblik 2014). They project into the heavens their own experiences, their images of femaleness and of motherhood. Terryl Givens has referred to the tendency in Mormonism to blur the line between the sacred and mundane. Joseph Smith’s theological innovation made God man and man god is the hallmark example (Givens 2007, 28). Participant Kayte Brown reflects this way of thinking:

I believe that birth is a sacred process of empowerment I’m not sure if I, theologically speaking, consider it women’s responsibility to give birth—because not all women can, want, or have the opportunity to give birth (I am an example of this). I do, however, consider it a sacred opportunity to experience godhood. I believe that birth is a rite of passage that prepares woman for the experience of motherhood. I believe that Heavenly Father and Heavenly Mother have different roles and responsibilities. When I am at a birth I pray for the presence of my Heavenly Mother, because that is her realm of responsibility—over her daughters as they bring their children into physical existence (Kayte 2014).

Kayte’s comments express a worldview adapted from *The Family: A Proclamation* discussed earlier. They also demonstrate how her own experiences have shaped the way she interprets Heavenly Mother’s role and by extension woman’s potential. It is not curious that Kayte draws a correlation between birth and the feminine divine; after all, the one thing official discourse has revealed about the figure is that she is a mother.

As a Mormon woman transitions into her maternal role, she takes on the sacred title of mother. It is a title that God, herself, adorns. As Daniel Chancellor-Checketts, a midwife and mother of ten children, remarked:

I feel women are very powerful. Birth helps them explore how powerful they are. It helps them become strong mothers. In the eternities, I can only imagine how knowing your strengths as well as weakness would assist a woman in reaching her full potential to preside beside her husband in glory (Checketts 2014).

In other words, in surmounting the travail of labor, women are being made holy. They are undergoing a transformative process that extends to life after death in becoming like the divine mother, in recognizing their immense strength.

Kayte's comments not only place women in the cosmos but also offer Heavenly Mother a role in the lives of her children grounded in terrestrial soil. The view was echoed by another participant, Rachel Steenblik. When I met Rachel we bonded relatively quickly, in part, over our interest in home birth. She had delivered her daughter at home years earlier. I was, at the time, pregnant with my second child. Rachel was also working on an article exploring poetic imagery of the feminine divine for a seminar we were attending. From her paper, Rachel shared a poem she had submitted to "The Mother Here: Art and Poetry Contest." Rachel's poetry is one example of how childbirth has revealed in a very personal way knowledge about the divine mother that is not a matter of official, but rather folk, discourse.

Her five-stanza poem entitled "I Dreamed I Wrote Five Poems" earned honorable mention in the above-mentioned contest and became the first in a series of poems about Heavenly Mother that Rachel published in her book *Mother's Milk: Poems in Search of Heavenly Mother* in 2017. Her first composition focused on reflections of the Mother in the

mundane world: a parched infant, a conch shell, olive oil, an inquiring child. But in the fourth stanza, the mother manifests to aid Rachel, a laboring mother:

God's spirit, God's Breath,  
the one He could not live without,  
gave me breath when I  
gave my daughter life.  
She sat beside me on the precipice  
so I would not be alone. We exhaled  
and inhaled in unison. She whispered,  
calling me by name. ("I Dreamed I Wrote Five Poems" 2013)

The trope of the eternal Mother as a loving midwife illuminates at least one of her roles. It is one realm in which she officiates and one moment in which she is experienced by her children. In the poem, it is significant that the Mother calls Rachel by name, reminding her that she is known by her mother. This has echoes of Mormonism's founding prophet who during his theophany heard the Father call to him, "Joseph."

*Mothers Milk*, a book of 144 pages of poetry, is filled with gorgeous poetic illustrations of the Divine Mother. They are fragments of Rachel's life story, written in prose and told through the lens of a daughter searching for her Mother. When I asked her what inspired the book, she responded:

I carried a daughter inside me, and birthed her without. It changed the searching, in that it was more personal. More poignant. I don't think it gave me more answers, but it gave me more wonderings, more thoughtful questions. And there was a Sunday, on the way to church, that Spencer tried to give Cora pumped breastmilk from a bottle while we rode the

train. And because I was there, she wouldn't take it. She just stared at me with the biggest, saddest brown eyes, knowing that the real thing was right there. It is when I started to imagine us as (necessarily) weaned from Heavenly Mother. And the abstraction of Her offering mother's milk. And wanting to. It's probably also influenced by Kierkegaard's prefaces to *Fear and Trembling*. There are four different versions, and each ends with a paragraph about some version of a mother blackening her breast, not because she didn't love her child, but because she did love him. That night . . . I literally dreamed that I wrote five Heavenly Mother poems. I was standing at a pulpit, reading them. Then I woke up, and wrote four more. They came so easily. Like magic. Or the spirit. (Steenblik 2017)

There are so many poems in this collection that deserve attention; it easily could be its own study. However, I have chosen three poems from the collection to discuss here:

1. "Body Memory"

Does it matter  
that Her body  
remembers  
the pangs of  
menstruation,  
infertility, and  
childbirth?

(It does to me.) (Steenblik 2017, 115)

This poem is fascinating in its anthropomorphism of the Mother. Joseph Smith taught that God was once a man and this poem reminds Mormons that the Mother was once a woman. While Mormons take comfort in knowing that Jesus experienced the sins and suffering of mankind as

part of the atonement, Rachel demonstrates the limitations of a male deity in understanding complexities of the female experience. Heavenly Mother fills this gap. She is a feminine divine who can relate to her daughters' uniquely gendered agonies and joys.

2. "The Morning Soreen was Born"

I heard the Mother's

birth cries,

from my

own

mouth (Steenblik 2017, 93).

God's bellow rises from Rachel's diaphragm and ascends into the air. It is the battle cry of a mother on the brink of creation and is powerful imagery. The poem captures the concept that many contributors relayed in their narratives: embedded in childbirth is the possibility of transcendent power.

Many contributors discussed what might be thought of as women's intrinsic qualities that prepare women for birth and motherhood. Rachel, for example, described the value she saw in women and the virtue of their ability to give birth:

A midwife friend told me that she doesn't even think of praying to Heavenly Father when she is helping women in that sphere. She feels so strongly that it is Heavenly Mother's domain. I did pray to Heavenly Father, but for Heavenly Mother to be with me and to support and sustain me. I do believe it is a sphere She is especially over. . . . I believe women are strong, wise, capable, and kind. I believe that they are daughters of God (both Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father), and that they have value in their own right, simply as being women and persons. I believe that mothers really are Godly, in the



physical sacrifices they make for their babe, both in pregnancy, birth, and after. They are the welcomers, welcoming a babe into their own body. They make their womb a home. They make space, room. They host. (Steenblik 2014)

In the final poem, Rachel describes an epiphany of a woman in labor, the moment she recognizes her divine role in giving birth. She characterizes the woman as a “deliverer,” who like Jesus in the hour of his crucifixion submitted to the pain for mankind’s sake. The words of this poem highlight Rachel’s belief that women are sanctified as they suffer for the sake of their children.

### 3. The Hour She Learned She was God

When Her hour  
came, She prayed  
to be delivered,  
before remembering  
the Deliverer  
was She. (Steenblik 2017, 41)

Like so many others, Rachel finds power in the traditional role of motherhood. For these women, the image of a divine mother transforms the mundane into acts of divinity. Perhaps the fact that little has been said about her adds to the potential power of women because it forces them to articulate their own agency and creativity to fill what might otherwise be a theological void. The divine mother, along with images of the suffering Christ, and the presence of deceased relatives, give shape to the vernacular and feminist theologies of Mormon birth workers and women who home birth. Their stories, and the beliefs embedded therein provide an expansive view of Mormon women’s cosmology and power. The narratives draw from the well of

institutional Church teachings at the same time they creatively interpret women's experiences. In so doing, they also respond to ambiguities in Mormon doctrine.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

I recently attended a Sunday school class at my local congregation on family history. The room came alive with stories regarding genealogical research, indexing, temple ordinance work, and pilgrimage to distant ancestral lands. Many of the stories shared were fantastic, narratives regarding personal revelation, visions and the spiritual manifestations of deceased family members. At the conclusion of the class, the instructor commented on the “spirit” that had been invoked through the stories shared by class participants. I too had been moved by their remarks.

I have been present for similar discussions in chapels throughout the United States. While neither the themes nor the sentiment was particularly uncommon, I was captivated by the deeply personal experiences of the men and women in that room. I was also fascinated with the correlation between their narratives and those I had collected. Their narratives transformed mundane acts—genealogy and reminiscence—into sacred events, set apart from the secular world by the supernatural.

Historian Richard Bushman once described the extraordinary influence of Joseph Smith Jr. as his power “to breathe new life into the sacred ancient stories, and to make a sacred story out of his own life” (1984, 188). I would add that Smith’s influence grew as he invited his adherents to adopt his craft. Mormon women and men too began to creatively interpret for themselves their personal histories and thereby to make sacred their own stories. I chose to explore home birth in the Mormon tradition because I am interested in the female space of birth and the practice of women assisting women that was once a strong Mormon tradition in the nineteenth century. I am intrigued by the experience of labor itself, how women’s bodies deal with a substantial amount of emotional and physical pain. That being said, this thesis is not

merely an exploration of Mormon alternative birth practices, it is also an examination of the creative process that has yielded innumerable variants of Mormon belief.

At the heart of Mormon experience is the impetus to root oneself within the sacred community. For many Mormons, perhaps most prominently, this grows out of the emphasis on genealogy and stories involving the intimacy between the living and those beyond the veil. For my contributors, the question has been where they, as women, fit into Mormon society and how Mormonism's gender ideologies as interpreted through their experiences with birth assist them on that exploration. Like Joseph Smith, who claimed his prophetic mantle through spiritual gifts and the sacred past, these women have found their own legitimacy within the tradition by connecting with Mormonism's foremothers, their ancestors, the female divine, as well as Christ himself. Through drawing on the Mormon tradition of crafting sacred narrative, they establish their place at the same time they redefine aspects of Mormonism's ideal family. To the women who participated in this research, these narratives are a recounting of a sacred rite of passage that has profoundly shaped their identities. The narratives themselves reify these experiences.

Throughout this research, I have been impressed by my contributors' powerful interpretations of womanhood. What many Christian theologians have deemed Eve's chastisement and woman's curse my contributors have viewed not simply as empowering, but as transcendent. These narratives allow women to reclaim their bodies and their religion from patriarchal interpretations, as well as to reinterpret the potential of women's power.

In Chapter One, I argued that the stories of my contributors subvert the institutional master narrative through their interest in natural childbirth. They have done so not only by rejecting a long history of male dominance in the field of obstetrics, which they share in common with the broader alternative birth community, but also through feminist renderings of a

nineteenth-century Mormon past. While they are subversive in effect, they are personal reflections of their most intimate beliefs.

In Chapters Two and Three, I explored how a feminine past, one too often overshadowed by male-centered, hierarchal actors, has been accessed by women to navigate patriarchal beliefs and create a meaningful discourse about women's roles in the church and family. Their nostalgia for this era highlights my contributors' search for a more inclusive Mormonism, one that empowers women through encouraging their use of spiritual gifts and acknowledges their power. For some of my contributors, that past is specifically personified in the image of early Latter-day Saint midwives who were set apart by prophets of God and with this unique authority administered to the needs of the community and especially to women in "the chamber of birth." Those stories provide meaning particularly, although not exclusively, to contemporary midwives and doulas who feel they are carrying forward a scared and near-forgotten tradition of Mormon women.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I examined home birth as a conduit of theological innovation for some Mormon women. I argued that as women recounted the immense pain and distinctive empowerment of labor and delivery, they author new and meaningful discourses about their place and their power in Mormon society. These vernacular theologies, as traced through several reoccurring themes, respond to institutional positions on the family and theological ambiguities about woman's role in the afterlife. For example, my contributors have described birth as an event in which women are made holy. It is a realm wherein deceased progenitors descend to inspire laboring women and women on the cusp of motherhood draw upon their priestly power. In their stories, women are transformed into Christ-like figures through their suffering and God-like beings as they perform the ordinance of embodying.

As a Latter-day Saint, it has been challenging to explore a subject and community to which I have such intimate ties, but it has also been a pleasure to bring out the voices of women whose stories highlight the alternative, but growing, practices of home birth in America and whose beliefs reflect Mormon women's theological ingenuity, past and present. It is my hope that this thesis has given voice to one group of Mormon women and that it might spark further research into women's continuing and complex negotiation of institutionalized religion.

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